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Le bizzarre avventure di JOJO

Golden Heart Golden Ring

ROMANZO
edizione italiana

KAPPA EDIZIONI

Coni is a shy and introverted girl, almost without friends, native to Roma.
Because of a series of bizarre events she's now in Venezia, working in her grandmother's stead, killed in an accident. In a big hotel of the lagoon city, she takes care of the rooms' cleaning, dragging her existence in a routine which little by little swallows her up in dullness and anonymity. But whatever works, as long as she can avoid having her big secret revealed and being hurt again, like it happened when she was at school.
Coni is a stand user, a mysterious presence, of which she never understood the origin, and that only her can see.
But, unbeknownst to her, she's about to be involved in an event bigger than her, in the centre of a fearsome vortex that will have her as the protagonist. Now Coni doesn't have any chance of escaping the course of events, and she'll be the one having to make a choice that will decide whether hundreds of innocent people will live or die.
A thriller of macabre twists, written in Japan but set in one of the most beautiful cities of Italy.
Based on the characters created by the brilliant Hirohiko Araki, Golden Heart Golden Ring perfectly retrieve the essence of the very famous JoJo's Bizarre Adventures, thanks to a new character never appeared in the original manga.
A completely new adventure that has the double quality of being readable on its own and being able to give explanations on important happenings and charismatic characters whose destiny had been left untold in the manga's pages.
A real surprise for anyone who loves the mysterious and unsettling atmosphere that only the authors of the country of the rising sun seem able to evoke.

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PROFILE

■ Giorno Giovanna
15 year old who wants to be a Gang-Star. He controls a stand, Gold Experience, which can turn inanimate objects into living beings.

■ Bruno Buccellati
Former gangster organization capo. Controls a stand, Sticky Fingers, which can open spaces on anything by use of zippers.

■ Guido Mista
Uses a revolver. Controls a stand, Sex Pistols, comprised of 6 entities who manipulate fired bullets.

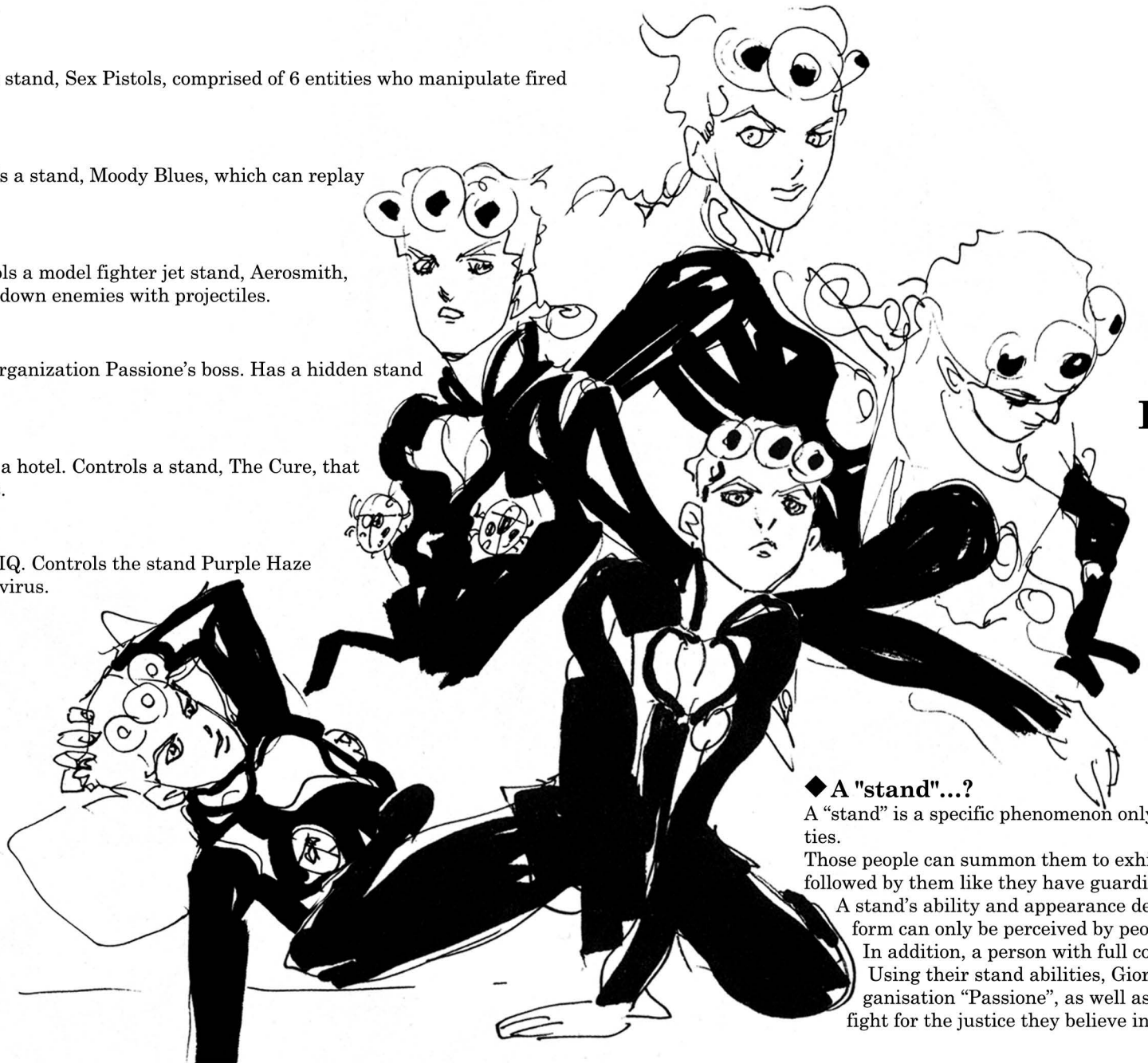
■ Leone Abbacchio
Former policeman. Controls a stand, Moody Blues, which can replay past events.

■ Narancia Ghirga
A lively 17 year old. Controls a model fighter jet stand, Aerosmith, which can detect and mow down enemies with projectiles.

■ Trish Una
Daughter of the gangster organization Passione's boss. Has a hidden stand ability.

■ Coniglio
17 year old girl working at a hotel. Controls a stand, The Cure, that cures injuries and illnesses.

■ Pannacotta Fugo
16 year old with very high IQ. Controls the stand Purple Haze which can spread a killing virus.



◆A "stand"...?
A "stand" is a specific phenomenon only manifested by those with special abilities.
Those people can summon them to exhibit their supernatural powers and are followed by them like they have guardian spirits.
A stand's ability and appearance depends on the person who is its host. Its form can only be perceived by people with stand abilities.
In addition, a person with full control over a stand is called "stand user". Using their stand abilities, Giorno, a member of the Italian gangster organisation "Passione", as well as Buccellati, are going to keep up the fight for the justice they believe in.

GIOGIO's Bizarre Adventure II

Golden Heart Golden Ring

Translated from Italian by Lesbicattiva and AzoreanEve

July - October 2019

Translated from Japanese to Italian by Laura Anselmino

This is a work of fiction; any resemblance to real people, events, or organisations is purely coincidental.
This is a fan project; it isn't meant to be profited from.

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■ Lesbicattiva, who despite being one of the translators herself, went to great lengths to photograph the entirety of the official Italian translation of the book, which seems to be unobtainable at the moment, thus creating Italian "scans".

■ Honor, for providing the Japanese scans of the book in high quality, which helped enormously, especially when the Italian text was confusing, ambiguous or on the rare occasions where it was wrong or omitted valuable content.

■ @highdio over on Tumblr, whose blog was the gravitational pull which led us to meet and eventually start this project. After all, stand users attract each other because of a stronger form of 'gravity' and 'fate', or something like that, right?

PROLOGO

– I know you’ve suffered a lot for the things that happened but it’s not possible to save everyone. The choices you can make are too many and the world is too complex. Neither you nor I can know which choice is right and which is wrong... – the boy said, all in one breath.

He was a strange boy, and on his clothes he had pinned big brooches in the shape of ladybugs.

His gaze was clear, and that meant he was speaking from the heart.

It was as if he emanated some sort of golden light.

A clear ray of golden light able to reach even the deepest part of her soul.

The proud blood that flowed for generations in the veins of the Joestar family’s descendants flowed without a doubt in his as well, and that beautiful light left a mark on the girl’s heart.

– We did choose the path of fight, and I’m not ashamed of it. I hope it’s the same for you. I truly hope so.

With those words the boy left the church behind, and began to walk towards the final battle. The girl, looking at his retreating figure, had perceived the heroic strength of his resolve, and was filled with more respect for him than she’d ever felt for anyone before.

The path of his struggle, perhaps, was lit by that golden light.

A thought crossed her mind.

As he’s going to fight his battle... then I... then I...

Stazione Santa Lucia
Canal Grande
Ponte di Rialto
Basilica di San Marco
Riva degli Schiavoni
Isola San Giorgio Maggiore
Venezia

CAPITOLO UNO

The emptiest place in the whole world is a hotel room after the check-out.

The unmade bed, both the bathrobe and the towels thrown in a corner, the closed window, the notepad scribbled here and there, the biro tumbled on the floor, the scent of soap foam swirled down the drain...

Just shortly ago there was someone. Now they're gone and nothing's left in the room but a faint trace.

The girl was in a room like this, empty.

She opened the window and the bright afternoon light poured into every crevice. The sky was azure and limpid.

The sea that could be seen below ranged from green to cyan, peppered with dots of white, until a blue so deep it seemed to drag you in, in a melange of colours that made it glisten as a precious stone.

Those over there, white, are the small islands of the Adriatico.

Now that from the wide-open window enters the rumble of people moving about in front of the hotel, the room can finally begin to breathe again.

The old closet and the dresser, pale as corpses, revive illuminated by the sea's reflections.

The girl tied her hair with a foulard, put on a pair of large gloves and an apron over the pale green cleaners' uniform and, finally, got to work. Moving away from the window and towards the bed, she removed the light orange blanket and folded it with swift movements, then laid it on the nearest surface. She took off the creased sheets and tossed them in the linen bag that was equipped on the metal cleaning cart.

In the sack there was already a heap of more than a dozen bed sheets and looking carefully one could notice how some were stained with tomato juice, spilt liquor from a guest, or even blood. If she drew her face closer she could smell the odour of sweat, blood, and saliva, an odour of near-animalistic grease that filled her with nausea. It is said that man is a thinking reed, but to her nothing could be further from the truth[1]. For her, rather than a plant, it was definitely more realistic to compare man to an animal.

Not that she cared much in the first place.

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[1] T.N.: Quote by Blaise Pascal: "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this."

She pondered that what happened yesterday in that room was not her business, and she didn't want to know after all.

Maybe a fat guy, one that sticks the last few hairs on his head with gel, in short, a typical middle-aged man, had brought there his young mistress for some filthy acts... Or maybe a young Japanese tourist, perhaps a student, spent a romantic holiday night downing cheap wine over a mountain of seafood...

It wasn't her business, she thought again, returning to work.

She grabbed freshly laundered sheets from the cart's other bag and spread them out on the bed. She folded the sheet under the mattress first on the left side, then at the foot of the bed and near the pillow, then on the right side. In good order. The bed being done, she quickly swept the dust from the chest of drawers and the table, then moved onto the bathroom. A brief cleaning with the vacuum and, with a single gesture, she threw away in the garbage bag hairs, empty candy wrappers, magazines, newspapers, tourist maps that were no longer useful, and all the other scraps. There, done. And then again, and again.

My job is to clean this room, as I did yesterday, the day before and last week, thought the girl.

Just that.

Nothing more, nothing less.

These are the circumstances that made it so that Coniglio, eighteen by December, became a chambermaid at a hotel.

Just two months ago her grandmother, who lived here in Venezia, was the victim of a car accident. She was a woman in her sixties. The vague memory Coniglio had of her was of a tanned woman, of olive complexion, that stuck her head out of her house's window. She was a sturdy old lady, the picture of health. Her fleshy mouth and her voluptuous figure, almost alluring despite her age, conveyed full womanliness. Like this, if Carmen[2] had grown older she would have probably resembled her. That was the impression she gave.

After her husband's death, in other words Coniglio's grandfather, which happened a few years earlier, she began her new life as a single woman in Venezia, working as a chambermaid at the luxurious hotel Mondo Aria, the city's most famous. So close to San Marco and the Riva degli Schiavoni, right by the sea.

This, at least, was what she'd heard from her mother, or from some relatives that maybe she wouldn't even have met had her grandmother's accident never happened.

Coniglio met her only a handful of times when she was very little and, honestly, didn't know her much.

All started when, suddenly, they stopped hearing back from grandma. Without any notice she stopped showing up at work. Her worried colleagues went to search for her at home, to ensure that nothing had happened to her. They found an empty house and, having no other means of contacting her, ended up calling Coniglio's mother.

[2] T.N.: First and only time this name shows up. A reference to the opera of the same name?

From Roma to Venezia. They rushed immediately but were unable to figure out what happened. The police, as always, weren't helpful at all. The only piece of information they got came from the unkind gossip of the chatterer neighbours, according to which she recently got a new man and blah blah blah...

Recalling grandma's love for life and body practically overflowing with femininity, they couldn't help but think it was far from unlikely.

She devoted some time consoling her mother, who, due to worrying, spent the whole day crying locked in the house, or receiving relatives that flocked there as soon as they got news of the disappearance. Until one day a woman knocked at her door saying she was Mondo Aria's personnel manager, the hotel where grandma worked. She explained that they were facing a shortage of staff and, basically, asked her to work in her grandmother's place.

Not knowing if or when grandma would return, Coniglio welcomed that proposal as an unexpected alternative to the neverending helpless languish her mother had chosen. So she accepted the employment position "until her return".

When she began working she realised an unexpected thing.

Making beds, using the vacuum and the cloth on furniture, bringing forgotten items from guests' rooms back to the reception, and many other little repetitive gestures which composed her routine... In conclusion, there wasn't anything that suited her more, she thought.

She quickly learnt the basic rules to work well and fast and, soon, even the bosses didn't fail to notice her.

She considered that, even if she returned to Roma, what awaited there was only her part-time at a fast-food, helping at home and hanging out with friends. She rightfully started thinking that remaining in Venezia could have been a good choice.

Like that a month passed, and then two, from grandmother's house to the hotel where she worked, and, right when she was getting accustomed to her new life, came the news that grandma had been a victim of a collision.

They rammed into her with a car and disappeared without helping.

The hit-and-run happened in the area, at the Lido di Venezia, renowned for its international film festival. Grandma was in the car when the vehicle behind rear-ended her and fled. They said she hit her head with such force that she probably died on the spot. But nobody ever found out about why the woman was at the Lido in the first place, nor why she checked-in at the hotel where she was sojourning with 'Mr. and Mrs. Brown'. Everyone would have guessed it was a pseudonym. But the more she asked for details the more everything seemed shrouded in mystery.

That man existed for real, then. The unkind rumours of the chatterer neighbours weren't completely baseless. The problem was that the man in question, in spite of the police's investigations, was nowhere to be found. The fact that he didn't show up regardless of his partner's accident put forth the possibility that he was a delinquent or something alike, and people suspected

some complicity as if in a trashy crime novel. The only thing certain is that nothing was ever known about him.

Maybe he never existed at all.

In the end, grandma's remains were brought back home in Venezia and a simple funeral ceremony was held. Coniglio's mother never stopped crying, and her siblings and other relatives, between one sip of wine and another, exchanged their most precious memories of the deceased.

For Coniglio, out and about, the funeral was over in a flash.

To her mother, who prepared to return to Roma after the sad task, the girl simply said: "There's the work at the Hotel" and remained in Venezia.

Imagining herself alone while making the bed in a stranger's hotel room, away from that Roma full of friends, sometimes gave her a sense of insecurity; a weird sensation.

Away from my native city to continue my grandma's work because of my passiveness... I really am a chronic hesitant she thought.

She told herself that, maybe, she had to be grateful to grandma if she managed to break away from Roma, where she had tons of good memories, but an equal number of bad ones.

From the room's window that faced Riva degli Schiavoni, she overlooked the sea. The sea and its scent. That of salt which pleasantly teases the nostrils, mixed with the putrid one of mud that accumulates on the shores, which seems to fill the sky to the brim. By lending an ear one could listen to the voices of herds of tourists, those of kids, as well as those suspicious of thieves and swindlers.

While she wiped the vanity table near the window, intent on eavesdropping those faraway voices, a stabbing pain on the finger brought her back to the present.

– Ahi!

She inspected her right hand's index finger and found a small splinter of wood embedded in it. A drop of blood oozed from the wound. She hastily brought the digit to her mouth and sucked on it. The afternoon was going by. Maybe its dim light had distracted her?

She tried pulling out the splinter by squeezing the finger with the other hand, but the more she fretted, the more blood came out; she felt her temples throbbing, her forehead covered in sweat.

It was then that a small white rabbit appeared over her shoulder. A rabbit so small that it could fit on the palm of your hand…

No, taking a better look perhaps it wasn't really a rabbit. It was only a round creature all covered in white fur. Compared to the body it had disproportionately large ears that constantly moved, much like an insect's antennae, and seemed to be exploring Coniglio, delicately touching her from the shoulders to her face, her stomach, her lower back. What set it apart the most from a normal rabbit were the eyes.

One was different from the other. The right eye was red. Of a dark red, like that of a ruby. The left one was instead yellow, of a colour similar to that of gold, and was slightly smaller than the right.

Between the eyes, in the middle of the forehead, sat a small blue stone. Similar stones were also on the back of its paws and on the tip of its huge ears.

They all shone rhythmically with a light of their own.

– The Cure! – exclaimed the girl while the white creature reached the finger where the splinter was stuck with its nose and started licking it. In no time the wound started to close and The Cure, after spitting the splinter from its mouth, curled up at Coniglio's feet.

The finger was perfectly healed. The place where just until now the splinter had been stuck was a bit warmer.

Coniglio massaged it, turning to the little animal as if to an old friend she hadn't seen for a long time.

– You've grown up – she whispered to it, stroking its back, and the critter, which had straightened its ears, made them waver in front of its snout, emitting a strange cry, as if in agreement.

Coniglio sat down on the floor. Moving its large ears like a cat, crouching on her knees, The Cure closed its eyes.

When the stones encrusted on its long ears touched, they made a noise, a kind of tinkle which Coniglio found incredibly pleasant.

Suddenly, while petting The Cure's back, Coniglio felt someone was about to enter the room and jumped to her feet.

– This isn't the time to slack off, Coniglio, check-in time is about to begin!

It was Leoni, a guy who worked at the hotel's kitchens. He'd been working there for over ten years now and, lately, never missed a chance to give Coniglio attention.

To tell the truth, it's not like she was thrilled about it. She couldn't even say that he was bothering her. The reality was that all the necessary formulas to relationships with people quickly drained her. On the other hand she understood that when working among people it's impossible to do without them, so… The fact is that she agreed to go out with Leoni that evening.

Likely, not seeing her come down, he had come to check up on her.

– I know, I know! This was the last room. I'll take the cart to the laundry and then I'll be done. I'll be there in ten minutes, wait for me…

– Be careful though, no matter how good you've become at work, if you get caught lazing around, you risk someone telling the bosses.

– Okay, I got it.

– I have to go prepare for dinner. I'll wait for you downstairs.

Coniglio hurriedly thrust the cleaning supplies into the cart and locked the door to the room, then, panting, joined Leoni who had left first and was waiting in front of the elevators.

– It's for tonight at eight, then. You won't miss it, right?

Leoni, laughing, asked a final confirmation from Coniglio. To him the white figure of The Cure, which scurried along the girl's feet, was not visible.

***

Coniglio had that peculiar thing ever since she was little. She had the mysterious power to absorb the pain of people she touched. And this power came from The Cure.

She didn't remember *when* she first became aware of the creature's presence. As a child she was always hanging around the city and there were countless quarrels with bullies and arrogant kids in the neighbourhood, all over petty things. Someone who bullied and someone who got bullied, someone who had stolen something from another, and so on… All things, in short, which any child has experienced but, strangely, Coniglio always found herself in their midst. A small matter became a much bigger one, punches were traded and the one who wouldn't give in until the end was always her.

And she never lost a fight.

There were the bullies much bigger than her who ran to their mother, blood running from the nose, whimpering that "Coniglio was being mean". Coniglio's mother had her hands full apologizing to the neighbourhood mothers who showed up to complain.

– You're really a tomboy! I would really like to know where you got that from…

Coniglio heard it all the time from her mother. What was strange was that there hadn't been a single time that she returned home with any sort of wound, despite the ruffians punching her nose or pulling her hair, or dragging her on the ground enough to skin her knees. Once she returned home with the pink dress she'd just been given all torn up, yet not only had they never needed to rush her to the emergency room, but her scratches also healed even before returning home.

What healed her was that mysterious rabbit that was always near her. The cuts on her still innocent face, the red bumps appearing amidst tousled hair like eggs in a bird's nest, when the tiny mouth of that rabbit licked them, the pain inexplicably disappeared and any type of wound vanished as if it had never been there.

Thus, Coniglio and The Cure found themselves sharing secret moments, that belonged only to the two of them. When she confessed to those red and golden eyes things that she couldn't have been able to tell even a friend, she felt strangely light. As if a weight had come off her shoulders, so much so that she had become convinced the creature could understand everything perfectly. Gradually she began spending less and less time with her friends and tending to stay holed up at home.

Naturally she still kept seeing the friends with whom she usually played house or other games, or with whom she went shopping at department stores in the neighbourhood, just as she hadn't stopped getting into fights with the ruffians in the area; but her best friend, as well as her treasure, had undeniably become that mysterious white creature she called The Cure. The local bullies, seeing that Coniglio continued to face them with a look of smugness despite all the beatings she took, had started calling her *Coni l'immortale*[3].

***

– Everyone has already left! – Winona told her, already ready to leave, when Coniglio entered the hotel staff's locker room.

Winona was a second-year student at the university of Venezia. She was an American that came for one of those cultural exchange programs for students. She too, like Coniglio, worked as an apprentice chambermaid. Hers was a kind of part-time job, but given that her father had the reputation for being close friends of the owner and managers of the hotel, she'd become some sort of manager responsible for the cleaning of several floors.

She was four years older than Coniglio but with her she quickly became very friendly. To her, who was so reserved, she'd taught plenty of things about work at the hotel. To be precise, she'd taught her that the most important thing in that job was a good relationship with your colleagues. In reality, she'd made her a detailed list of the various members, from the dullest to the most spiteful, for example, explaining the many friendly relations that linked one another, and things like that.

She was practically a more experienced companion that would teach her in detail even those things which if considered of no importance, as a result, became indeed inconsequential.

Winona studied literature at university.

When they ate together, she happened to talk about authors and works of Italian and French literature with great ease. For someone like Coniglio who only read comics or magazines about music and cinema, the names Winona mentioned in her speeches were almost all unknown or, at best, heard mentioned by chance. But if she pointed this out to her, she'd then go on to talk about colleagues, so much so that she gave the impression of being a huge gossiper whose only asset was being an intelligent woman.

To tell the truth, it wasn't like Winona enjoyed great popularity among her colleagues, to the point that, seeing the thick glasses she always wore, people called her 'the American prude' or 'four-eyes' behind her back. Perhaps they were jealous that she had gotten her job because of her father's connections.

But, on that day too, exchanging a few words with Winona was one of the things that Coniglio was looking forward to the most. Winona's speech, when she spoke in Italian with that strong English-speaking inflection of hers, didn't change at all whether she gossiped, or whether she talked about complicated literature, and it was fascinating.

[3] T.N.: Literally "Coni the immortal"

From what she said it was easily understood that she was a clever person and for this she envied her a bit. In few words, Coniglio really liked Winona.

And for someone like her, who didn't easily open up to new friendships, that meant a lot.

– Now, Coni… – Winona started saying, removing her glasses by hooking a finger on the thick black frame. Her face, without the glasses, was as gorgeous as a Hollywood actress'. The first time she'd noticed it, Coniglio had been quite surprised.

– ...what did you decide to do?

– About what? – replied Coniglio, removing the cleaning uniform.

– Come on, don't play dumb…

– I'm not.

– I'm talking about Leoni. You got a date tonight, just the two of you, no?

– Nothing of the sort… really.

– There's nothing to hide. But perhaps it will be better if you don't trust that guy too much. The other day I saw him at Piazzale Roma with another woman. Claudia said so too.

– …

– Ah, Italian men are all alike.

–... Indeed.

A good-looking guy like Leoni, it would be surprising if he didn't already have a girl. I wondered if he really likes me. Yes, maybe it's true but...

Despite thinking like that, Coniglio couldn't convince herself. She understood it very well, but…

– Don't make such a sombre face – Winona told her, worried about what she saw in her countenance.

If it worries you, you simply shouldn't have told me anything Coniglio couldn't help but think.

But she said nothing.

– I'm sorry, I didn't think you were this interested in Leoni…

– Leave it be, it has nothing to do with Leoni…

– Really, I'm sorry…

– There's nothing to be sorry about.

– But…

– All's fine, really. Everything's ok.

After staring at Coniglio's face for a long while, Winona finally replied:

– Then, to make up for ruining your date… – she started, lowering her gaze – I'll pay this evening. I'm offering you dinner!

– What?

– Shush, enough chattering. I pay and that's it.

Coniglio, seeing Winona finishing that sentence looking ashamed, felt a bit relieved.

***

The building that housed the Mondo Aria hotel was built in the 16th century and it originally was the summer house of a prestigious Venetian family. The current owners had acquired it and turned it into a hotel a hundred years ago. The rooms had been remodelled several times to be modernized, either to equip them with a shower, or the minibar, and such things. Regardless, the atmosphere in the rooms was very relaxing and the furniture and beds old but comfortable. In addition, the rooms that overlooked Riva degli Schiavoni were gifted with a luxurious terrace, while the back faced a canal where there was a small dockage from where one could get on a gondola.

On the ground floor you could find the restaurant where Leoni worked. The kitchen was of an average level, the kind that pleases tourists, but to enjoy a good Venetian wine there while being caressed by the particular luminosity of the sun being reflected on the lagoon had its charm. It was truly the relaxed atmosphere that made that spot a place of success, listed among the most recommended in numerous travel guides.

Entering the hotel from the main entrance which faces the lagoon, the first thing you noticed was the entrance hall's own surroundings, obtained by internally raising the ceiling up to the third floor. The walls were decorated with frescoes and paintings that belonged to a family collection enriched for generations and which produced the atmosphere of the 'old and beautiful Europe'. The shadows were cut by the sunrays that reached from the outside and seemed to cling to the skin and lit it in a golden light. At the centre, as if sprouted from the floor, towered the marble columns that gave a pleasant accent to the setting. You would only need to take two or three steps towards those columns for staff members to welcome you as if they'd been there waiting for you.

With the luggage delivered to the hotel porters, all you needed was to walk straight across the lobby to find yourself before the reception: if you turned right there was the restaurant, while if you turned left you'd find a small coffee shop, perfect for when you need to wait for someone. It was right there that Coniglio was waiting for Winona's return, who'd gone to the nearby post office to send a letter.

Leoni's face, when told she wouldn't go to the date that evening, was a spectacle to behold. A mix of surprise for something he certainly didn't expect, confusion because he couldn't see the reason behind it, as well as supplication and repressed anger. Upon seeing such an expression, Coniglio had, for a moment, had the feeling she'd done something unfair and regretted it.

As much as she had been encouraged by Winona, she felt surprised to have done such a crazy thing. Mostly it was how quickly she had taken action, something normally unthinkable for her character, which amazed her even more as she was saying:

– Sorry, Leoni. Something came up this evening and I can't put it off.

– Ah, don't worry. We'll do it next time. There will be a next time, right? – Leoni replied, unconvinced despite those words, while she sent him back to the kitchens and headed to the rendezvous coffee shop.

Today I feel different from other days. What could be happening to be? Is it because of The Cure's presence? thought Coniglio.

The only beverage she saw worthy of being drunk at a coffee shop was the cappuccino. Everything else, be it juices or alcohol, disgusted her. Bringing her cup to the lips, she absent-mindedly observed the flow of clients that constantly arrived. She thought that, probably, they would soon be inserting in the door the metallic key they had received at the reception and, with the window opened, would involuntarily hold their breath before the sea view that would be spread in front of their eyes. Then, after the sunset, out in the city, among the students who party today like yesterday and like they will tomorrow, to enjoy Venezia at night and then return exhausted to rest their tired limbs on the beds she had prepared.

On that thought Coniglio let out a sigh. Maybe the reason why she kept doing that job was that she envied a bit all that noise the tourists made for nothing. It was in that moment that she took notice of the strange atmosphere which had suddenly taken over the lobby.

She couldn't immediately understand why. There was the usual busy coming and going of the hotel porters, the usual clientele arriving loaded with heavy suitcases, the usual bad smell exuded by their sweaty bodies. Then, she singled out the figure of a young man who stood out heavily in such a scene.

He was a whole head taller than her. Roughly a meter and seventy-five. He was blond and his hair done in a strange style, as if the wind had ruffled it in locks and said locks had then been gathered together by force with a comb. Draped over the skin he wore an outfit with moss green jacket and trousers, cut out as if the holes were a polka pattern, and wore on the neck a blue necktie with large strawberries drawn on it. He had the relaxed posture of someone who was there waiting for someone but on that elegant face his eyes shone with a strange light.

As if he'd felt the girl's gaze on him, he suddenly turned to her and, with a gentle smile, approached.

– Ciao! – he greeted cheerfully.

Coniglio felt confused. The young man now wore a merry expression, completely different from the alert and cautious one just before. She wondered whoever he could be.

– I'm here waiting for a friend but… – the young man started, and a fresh scent of mint wafted from his mouth.

– I forgot my watch at home and don't know what time it is.

– Ah… – exclaimed Coniglio, and looked at her watch. – It's almost two.

– Thank you.

He thanked her politely with a slight nod and returned to where he'd been waiting before. The smell of mint left with him. Watching him walk away, involuntarily, Coniglio felt a cold shiver running down her spine.

What was happening? At first she couldn't understand what she saw in front of her. From the young man's back she saw propagating a thick cloud of purple smoke which soon began to take shape.

That strange thing had its body covered in a black and violet checkered motif, and its face covered with a mask similar to a medieval armour's helmet. On its fists were odd mustard colour capsules. It gave her the impression that the young man had with him some sort of spectral servant. Upon seeing this, Coniglio felt her head spinning and placed her hands on the table for support.

She had the sensation of imminent danger, as if something terrible was about to happen.

As if he was fully aware she was still watching him, unable to move, the young man gave her a look and, slowly, made a wide gesture with the right hand.

– What are you daydreaming about?

– Aah!

Feeling touched on the shoulder without warning, Coniglio let out a cry and was so surprised she almost fell off her chair. She turned and saw Winona laughing. She'd finally returned from the post office.

– Sorry! Didn't mean to scare you…

– Look! There… – Coniglio pointed towards the young man.

– Who is it? Have you already found a substitute for Leoni?

Coniglio would never forget Winona's face, who at that moment laughed, winking.

A dull noise rang out from below and almost in the same instant all the lights in the hotel went out. In the distance she heard the sound of broken glass, angry shouts, sounds similar to those made by tearing silk…

The calm atmosphere that reigned over Mondo Aria hotel's lobby became shrouded in darkness in just an instant.

– Coni!

She heard Winona's voice nearby.

– Winona!

– Aah! Coni!

She reached out her hand to where she heard the voice come from and immediately found Winona's arm.

– Are you alright?

– Ah! Aah! Aaah!

– What's happening to you?! What's wrong, Winona?!

She got up from the chair and groped around for Winona who she'd seen behind her.

– It burns! I can feel myself burning!

Coniglio's hand reached something warm and slimy.

– What's going on?! What is it?!

And in that moment the lights returned.

Coniglio had a hard time believing what she had in front of her eyes.

The swollen arm, the black streaks running down the body. The lips were twisted in a grimace, the face covered in large blisters. The horror was such that she was about to move her hand away. The abomination in front of her was Winona.

– I'm burning! I'm burning! Help!

Waving her hands, she hit the blisters on her face, squishing them, causing a green substance to come out. Paying no mind to it, Winona kept compulsively scratching her whole body. Every time the nails touched the skin, it would tear away like paper, and the meat crumbled in shreds emanating a stench like rotten fish.

– What is this?! What's happening to you?!

Blood poured dark and thick from every part of the body, but the strangest of it all was that upon contact with the air, it turned into a purple smoke which quickly thinned out and then dissolved.

Every centimetre of Winona's body was covered in blisters, pustules, and bleeding wounds. Before Coniglio's bewildered eyes, her legs had begun to quickly rot, until they broke away from the trunk which, losing its support, slowly crumpled to the ground as if moving in slow motion. She fell in a straight line, like she was about to kiss the ground in blessing.

Winona's hand that desperately tried to reach the closest chair for support broke away at the wrist with a dry noise. The other hand kept shaking in the air, searching for a hold that wasn't there.

Maybe it had hit against a table but a finger broke off and, springing off, stuck to Coniglio's face.

– Aaah!

With a yell she hurried to remove it. On the hand that had touched it remained a dark gelatinous substance which gave off a disgusting smell whose effect went straight to the stomach, like that of organic waste gone bad.

Perhaps from the blow received when hitting the ground, Winona's neck was bent in a particularly unnatural position. A cheek was stuck to the floor, but the head kept shakingly stirring upwards as if it were coming out of that same floor.

– ... Coni… Coni…

Maybe because her neck was broken, now Winona was no longer even able to call the name of her friend, who was right in front of her, staring at her, unable to do anything, sitting on the ground. Next to her knees, who knows when, The Cure had appeared again.

Winona's face started getting visibly covered in wrinkles until a violet smoke started coming out from every orifice, mouth, ears, nose, eyes. Coniglio kept staring horrified at the friend who was losing shreds of meat, to remain in only skin and bone.

Right then her hand touched The Cure's back.

It's true… Maybe, trying to use The Cure's power… maybe I can save Winona! However…

It was during that moment of hesitation on her part. The arm that Winona kept desperately twitching stopped abruptly and, before she could realize it, fell to the ground. A dull heavy sound.

– ... Uh… uhh…

Winona desperately tried to gather her remaining strength to scream, but her body started to completely crumble apart. The purple smoke started coming out from everywhere as if under pressure, like in a movie being seen at a faster speed.

– Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Coniglio was aware of someone screaming. It was a painful cry of rage, from someone cursing everything and everyone. And it was she herself who had let it out.

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Blaming her would be too easy. However, in that moment, she knew too little about many things.

She didn't know that the blond boy was called Pannacotta Fugo or that the strange purple figure she saw appear at his back was Purple Haze.

She didn't know that it was a *stand*, the corporeal manifestation of a particularly strong vital energy which only a select few possess. The vital energy that takes shape. The stand, a presence that possesses powers and defined form and is able to interact with the real world.

Coniglio wasn't yet aware that such a thing existed. And she had no idea her The Cure was a stand as well, and that there was a rule by which stand users attract each other.

She knew absolutely nothing about any of this. Yet in the wheel of fate, the gears had already begun to turn.

INTERLUDIO

The young man was wandering the chaotic streets hidden behind the buildings of Venezia. His body was so thin he almost looked ill. But still his gaze was sharp and looked around with vigilance.

It was Pannacotta Fugo, the mysterious young man who had exchanged some words with Coniglio and afterwards was suddenly gone. He was walking towards a building which sat at the back area of Piazza San Marco. There, among a group of old, tea colour houses, was the den of the gang which ruled over Venezia.

A room which had once been a cellar. The renovations were perhaps still ongoing. Scattered about the place were still several cement bags, big shovels, and pickaxes.

He had been led into that room after having gone through a long and narrow corridor, and was now before a man of incredibly short stature.

– For the first test, I can say you did well… – whispered the short man with a tone of irony evident in his voice.

He must have been very old, because his voice was reduced to a whisper and seemed to almost be about to be lost from one moment to the next. The room was very dark, illuminated only by the light of some candles. Old dust, probably accumulated throughout decades, let the outlines of the room fade in ambiguous darkness.

Beyond such darkness, the man spoke again.

– But it's not enough to make you accepted into the organisation. You understand that, right?

The young man made an understanding gesture.

– The final objective is a single one…

– …

As much as he sought to train his eyes on it, the man's face remained shrouded in darkness and couldn't be seen. The candles, too, had been wisely placed so that he remained obscured. Fugo was stared fixedly at him, as if trying to read in the shadows the expression with which the man spoke to him.

– The final objective is a single one, Buccellati's head. That's all that Boss wants. You're well aware of that, aren't you, *Fugo il traditore*[4]?

Pannacotta Fugo was one of the members of the group headed by Buccellati. He'd been a child prodigy, son of wealthy people, with a surprising IQ of 152. To meet the expectations of those around him, he had worked so hard that he entered university at the young age of thirteen. Fugo remembered very vaguely this period of his life, things like having played on his father's lap, or his mother who had kindly helped him in his studies.

[4] T.N.: literally "Fugo the traitor".

In the prosperous environment of a family of high society, he had probably simply let himself get carried away by his surroundings. To meet the expectations of those near, he had been a boy who never had his own opinion…

Of course, in almost every part of the world, most people experience a period of their lives spent in a similar situation. In that sense, his wasn't a particularly strange case. Be it the children of the rich, be it those of the poor, be it those who lost their mother or those raised in an orphanage, all struggle to find their own identity and often passively endure the matter of 'being children'.

His first act of rebellion happened right during university. Fugo, who had a tendency for being hot tempered, had gone on a rampage over some trifle and savagely beaten a professor with a dictionary. The man was left gravely wounded and had been hospitalized with a prognosis of a few months. Obviously Fugo was expelled.

From that time onwards he had completely lost his control.

The parents did their best to convince him into resuming his studies but, at the smallest thing, Fugo would once again lose his temper. No one could keep him in check. The mother begged him, crying, to go back to what he used to be, and every time she did so, it deeply pained Fugo. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't control himself. Soon he'd find himself without friends.

Almost without noticing it, he had started frequenting domains of the underworld, until he wouldn't return home again.

Despite joining an organisation, his violent character remained unchanged. Even there his companions started avoiding him. Soon all the gangs in Napoli knew that, when he got angry, he got to the point of nearly beating to death whomever he quarrelled with.

A terrible temperament, which seemed to want to act as counterpart to an unusual intelligence. In that dangerous balance he lost himself, and the turmoil that ensued carried him to a new outburst of violence. Fugo, for the organisation, was starting to become a nuisance.

The one who'd taken him under his wing at that point had been none other than Buccellati.

Yet now their paths diverged.

The reasons had been manifold.

CAPITOLO DUE

Venezia, famous city of the Italian northeast. If you were to imagine Italia as a boot, you'd find it right over the calf, at the back of the knee. It is surrounded by an area of lands, uncovered during low tide, called Laguna, and its exotic wonder derives from the maze of canals that transverse it, as well as from the many churches and large buildings that maintain the look and feel of when, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Mediterranean commerce was at its peak.

From northwest to southeast, crossing through the city's centre, runs the Canal Grande, a large canal in the shape of a reverse S. Roughly at its middle, it is crossed by a large bridge of marble arches named Ponte di Rialto, around 28 metres in length.

The Rialto area is among the most frequented of Venezia. On the bridge's vicinity are sold jewellery, lace, leather articles, and the famous Venetian glass, and it is here one can come across hundreds of tourists daily. Even on that day there was huge bustle, between tourists voluntarily spending rivers of money, and pickpockets who searched for an easy way into their pockets.

From the water stagnating all over the canals rose the saccharine odour of the sea, which mixed with the smell of beer and warm sausages, of hot-dogs for the younger tourists, as well as of vegetable waste gone bad that occasionally peered out of some corner.

All in all, nothing out of the ordinary.

Except for one thing…

Following for a while the main road crossing Rialto towards south, after a bit, to the left, a small square can be found in which stands a church. The destination is further beyond, after a long journey through the secondary roads. The small streets of Venezia are intricate like a maze and you simply need to be one road away from the main street to see a completely different facet of the city. Dusty dirt-coloured houses huddle together. On the ground, leftover vegetables and bones with some remaining meat still attached formed piles of garbage here and there. An old skinny dog poked around in them with its nose. The impression given was that of a poor neighbourhood, but this wasn't an isolated case. All that's needed is to walk away a bit from the tourists' cheerful voices and go in the side streets for places like this, like hideouts away from the eyes of the masses, to be found in abundance.

In one of these lots of houses, there was one with a moss green door. Rather, it had been that colour long ago. Almost all of the peeling paint had fallen and its state was anything but good. On the front could be read the sign RISTORANTE. It should have been a place where they serve you meals, but the impression given wasn't that. The glass on the windows was so old it had acquired an ochre colour and became irregular. Taking a look through these, strange guests could be seen in the interior, quite in *accordance* with a restaurant of this kind. In short, there were people.

There were three suspicious-looking young men and a boy with an old turtle on his right hand.

They didn't look like locals, but they also didn't give off the impression of tourists who'd come to Venezia during vacation either. Perchance, one who knows certain environments would notice it

immediately. Those were certainly criminals. A group that had its base in Napoli and belonged to an organisation called Passione. More accurately, that belonged to it until some days prior.

The young man with black hair, Buccellati, only just twenty, had been Polpo's right hand, one of the capi of the organisation. When Polpo mysteriously died, leaving behind a personal fortune valued at around six billion, Buccellati had given it back to Passione, obtaining in exchange the position of ‘capo’. That is, he'd obtained Polpo's Neapolitan license to control gambling, betting, profits from extortion and smuggled goods, ‘management’ of restaurants, hotels, and usurers. In short, he had gained control over an enormous circuit of money.

As well as another thing.

Polpo let behind an unfinished ‘job’, and that too was now in Buccellati's hands as part of his inheritance.

It was an order Polpo had received from the Boss of Passione shortly before dying. He had to bring Trish Una, the Boss’s daughter, to him in person, safe and sound. It was no easy task, even if Buccellati was gifted with very special powers. In fact, he too was a stand user.

When it comes to an enormous organisation such as Passione, naturally traitors and enemies who try to get their hands in their trades aren't amiss. The Boss’s daughter, single blood link of this figure shrouded in mystery, was a real treat in the eyes of anyone who wanted to betray the organisation, given that getting your hands on her could mean discovering the identity of the top leader.

One couldn’t ask for anything better.

Buccellati and company ended up having to face a long series of traitor hitmen, with code names such as White Album, Man in the Mirror, Talking Head, and many others. Only after shaking off their persistent attacks had they somehow succeeded at arriving in Venezia, like the Boss had ordered them to. But what awaited them at their rendezvous, the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, was the discovery of a reality they had never expected.

The Boss’s real objective was to kill his own daughter.

For fear of seeing his real identity found out, he had decided to eliminate anything that could provide a clue that would lead to him by his own hands, thus even including blood of his own. To protect himself he didn’t hesitate to kill an innocent girl whose only mistake was being his direct descendent. Buccellati was unable to repress his rage at the Boss’s demeanour, and this had been the motive for his ‘betrayal’ towards the organisation.

He had bravely confronted the Boss but his powerful stand, King Crimson, able to foresee the near future and erase some seconds of time (during which only he is able to move), completely defeated him. Thanks to his companions’ intervention, Buccellati came out of this encounter alive, though barely. That had marked the beginning of the war.

The problem was how to get out of Venezia and that island while avoiding ambushes from new hitmen surely sent after them.

But while deciding the course of action to be taken, time inexorably passed…

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– Abbacchio, do you know the Super Mario video game?

Over the table were lined up several empty wine bottles, leftovers of typical Venetian risotto alla pescatora, bigoli with anchovy sauce, alici marinate, salami and other delicacies that made your mouth water from just looking at them.

– But how? Don't you know it?! It's had huge success all over the world! Oh well, it doesn't matter. The main character of Super Mario is an Italian, who is called Mario…

The one talking was a young boy that gave a bit of a know-all vibe. His name was Narancia Ghirga. Big eyes and slightly upturned nose, lips always jutted out. He wore a short black jacket which left his chest out atop his trousers, also black. Black too were the pointed shoes, decorated with a large metal stud, the most ornate item of his attire. The only splash of colour on that black ensemble was a bright orange, diamond patterned, piece of cloth he had wrapped around his middle. On his lap he held a turtle with great care. From his constant moving, he let you catch a glimpse of something like childishness. However, for Buccellati, this was a very important member of the group.

– You know, he has a big moustache, and I think there's a striking resemblance!

– ?

– I'm talking about the Mario from the warehouse!

– …?

– But what, don't you get it?

– What sort of bullshit are you talking about?

– I'm talking about the warehouse we used in Napoli, the one down at the docks! He's the spitting image of old Mario Segalli who guarded it!

Enthused over his own talk, Narancia fidgeted while speaking with the blond-haired man at his side. Because he was waving about his fork, on which his pasta was rolled, sprinkles of anchovy sauce splashed here and there on the table.

At such a sight the other one grimaced.

– …

– Doesn't it resemble him? Eh? Tell me it doesn't resemble him! – he urged, leaning forward. With this movement, the wine glasses on the table wobbled dangerously. His three companions, instinctively, each took hold of their own for safety. "If you don't stop with that you'll ruin our lunch" seemed to scold the glares shot together at the boy.

At that, Narancia dropped himself back on the chair with a determined expression.

– *I swear* they used Segalli as a model for the character of Mario. Don't you believe it too, Abbacchio?

– Shut it for a bit, Narancia – the other retorted, punching him in the face.

– Damn you! Do you know what you just did?!

The man at whom Narancia was venting his rage was Leone Abbacchio, twenty. Very long blond hair[5], black coat and trousers. His belt buckle was a big letter A, his surname's initial. He was the tallest of the group, at a height of 190 centimetres. His face held a stern expression similar to that of a Greek statue. The red lipstick he wore on his lips stood out, giving him a bizarre look, whereas he considered it extremely elegant. Although no one would ever risk pointing it out to him. Before joining the gang he had been a policeman, and there was no thug who wouldn't tremble even at a glance of his.

– Ouch! It hurts!

Pressing with his hand the back of his head where he'd been struck, Narancia, fallen from his chair, struggled on the ground.

– Ow, ow, ouch!

– Are you all right, Narancia? – came the concerned question from the boy sitting across the table. It was Giorno Giovanna. Short tied blond hair, a face with a proud look, resembling that of Michelangelo's David. His clothing, suit jacket and trousers, were of a rich green colour, with large ladybug shaped brooches on both sides of his chest. Not only that, but the belt had a buckle also in the shape of a ladybug. It seemed Giorno really liked those beetles.

Giorno was the newest addition to Buccellati's group. Perhaps it was because of this that, unlike the others, in his behaviour, none of that harshness of a gangster could be found. Giorno oozed almost a sense of nobility, as if he were the prince of some country. Nevertheless, with his incredibly quick judgement in even the most extreme scenarios, he quickly gained the respect of the other members of the group.

– Abbacchio hit me! Ouch! Ow! Fuck you, Abbacchio!

Stroking Narancia's sore head, Giorno replied:

– Ah, yes, you have a nice bump.

– Did you see it, Buccellati? Abbacchio hit me!

Narancia finally turned to the man that since the beginning, without ever even glancing at all that loud racket they'd been doing, had been engrossed in reading the newspaper. It was the man himself, the head of the group, Bruno Buccellati.

What stood out the most about him was his hair, neatly cut into a straight bob cut. Stripped hair clips were attached right by his temples, so that at a first glance he almost seemed like a girl.

[5] T.N.: we double checked the original Japanese text. Abbacchio really is blond with red lipstick in this story. He's not the only one with some changes to his appearance.

Who could have ever said this was a capo of a criminal organisation? Especially of that dreadful one called Passione! His white suit, dotted with 'keyhole' symbols and traversed by large zippers on the arms and chest, made you think of an unordinary man.

Since Buccellati kept reading unflinchingly, ignoring Narancia's desperate attempts at getting his attention, Giorno approached him and inquired:

– Have you found any interesting articles?

– Giorno… take a look at this – Buccellati replied, pointing to an article on which, standing out in big letters, the title posed the question: "Attack with biological weapons?". It pertained to the incident that happened the day before near the Basilica di San Marco, at the old and renowned Hotel Mondo Aria. It seemed that about twenty tourists and employees had been involved, but since an unidentified biological weapon had been used (the author hypothesized the use of a new type of virus), the victims were in such condition that not only they could not be identified, but also made it impossible to know how many there really were. A single person, a girl who worked at the hotel, had survived the attack, but was currently hospitalized in a severe state of shock.

So far no one had claimed credit for these actions, but the article stressed that they had been an "atrocious crime which, by targeting tourists, seriously harms Venezia's image" and that "the brutality shown by the use of biological weapons" made it a "terrorist act which leaves you speechless" and concluded by heavily criticising the actions of the (assumed) group which perpetrated it.

– What strikes you about this article, Buccellati? – asked Abbacchio, after giving a quick look at the newspaper Giorno handed over to him.

– A *new virus* capable of quickly eliminating twenty people in an instant. Can you imagine what could do such destruction? – Buccellati asked him in response.

At their side, unable to read the newspaper, Narancia followed the conversation, holding his breath.

It was Giorno who cut to the chase.

– You suspect that Fugo is behind this incident, right, Buccellati?

– Wha… what?!

– What did you say?! – exclaimed Abbacchio and Narancia in unison, taken by surprise.

***

Fugo had left their group a few days earlier.

After the fight with King Crimson, Buccellati had expressed his decision to leave the organisation and had said:

– This will be a war with even less hopes of winning than the one we've been fighting up to today. Who will come with me?

Giorno, Abbacchio, Narancia… One after the other his companions got into his boat. Only Fugo had adamantly remained on the island.

He no longer felt like trusting this leader who proposed betraying and rebelling against Passione, the giant organisation which up to that day had welcomed and protected him. Fugo's reasoning had been against wagering with such low chances of success.

– I don't get why! – Narancia yelled.

It had been Fugo who gave a helping hand to Narancia when, betrayed by his own parents, he'd lost all trust in other people. It was him who opened up the path for him to join the organisation. And despite being a year younger than him, he'd respected Fugo like a real older brother. Separating from him had already been too painful of an experience for Narancia.

And now this. How could Fugo be guilty of a terrorist act that involved people who hadn't done anything wrong?! Narancia couldn't believe it. Rather, he *did not want* to believe.

– Maybe Buccellati has a point. Fugo's stand, Purple Haze, would have no trouble doing something like this – continued Abbacchio, after reading the article again.

– But, the range of his virus is around five meters around him. Instead, here, all the people who were in the hotel lobby became casualties! Although it is a powerful virus, these facts do not add up.

– No, shortly before the attack, there was a blackout at the hotel and the surrounding area. To be affected by Purple Haze's virus one indeed needs to be as close as five meters, but that only goes for conditions with normal lighting. In the dark, and even more so in a closed space like the lobby of a hotel, it's not unthinkable for his contagion to strengthen up to ten, maybe even twenty times higher.

– Indeed, that could be possible…

Abbacchio found no objection to Giorno's speculations. Purple Haze's virus was indeed dangerous enough to swiftly kill anyone who breathed it in. On the other hand it was very sensitive to light. Under sunlight it lost effectiveness in a very short time, with artificial light it lasted at most thirty seconds. However, in the special case where light was completely gone…

– But then *why*? I see absolutely no reason for it! – Narancia retorted unfaltering, as he wouldn't allow himself to be convinced by Giorno's explanations.

– It looks like someone sabotaged the nearest breaker panel – commented Buccellati, who up to now had remained listening to Abbacchio and Giorno's discussion.

– This would mean that Fugo wasn't alone. There are more people involved in this ordeal. At least, one that cuts the power and one that spreads the virus in the hotel lobby… Essentially, the organisation is involved.

At those words a veil of heavy silence befell the table.

In that dust-filled place the mood had become very heavy. Due to shock, Narancia could no longer find his voice and stuck to brooding, tormenting the plate of pasta before him with his fork.

Abbacchio too remained in silence, with eyes fixed upwards, on an imaginary point on the ceiling. Who knows what was going through Giorno's mind, when he picked up again the newspaper which was atop the table and immersed himself in his thoughts.

It was Buccellati who broke the silence.

– Fugo is back to receiving orders from the organisation. I don't know his reasons, but can imagine that after leaving us he returned to it.

– This means the information I got a hold of has something to do with you.

The door opened and, making a bell chime with a sound so cheerful that it felt out of place, the man who had uttered those words came indoors.

He was wearing a tight sweater with a diamond grid pattern and a pair of tiger-striped trousers. On his head he wore a cap with a large arrow-shaped decoration on the front. It was an ensemble which would hardly have met the tastes of someone with common sense but, in hindsight, it turned out that *no one* in this group was wearing normal clothes. However this newcomer with an athletic build surpassed all the others so far when it came to originality. His name was Guido Mista. He too was part of Buccellati's group.

His torso was manly and athletic, the legs long and muscular, made for running. His body had been trained to the extreme, so much so that at first glance it made one think of the agility of a wild beast. More than anything, however, it was the gun he carried, holsterless, hanging from the trousers which hinted at how dangerous he could be to deal with.

– The thugs round here are real wimps. You just shake them a bit and they immediately piss themselves. Like this it's not even fun.

– And? – Abbacchio hurried him on, ignoring his banter.

– Ah, my bad, it's true, you're right. Looks like those from Venezia are gathering a lot of explosives in the area. Among the gangs, there's even talk about the beginning of a war.

– I think the explosives were for yesterday's affair at the hotel, don't you agree, Buccellati?

Buccellati was of the same mind as Giorno. He nodded, then replied:

– I do think you're right, Giorno. And what's more, there's still a huge amount of explosives remaining, hidden somewhere, waiting to be used. The organisation really has intentions of continuing their work.

– Do you have any idea where they could have hidden it, if the amount is that big…?

– Good question, Giorno. Apparently they aren't keeping it all in the same place. From what I've come to know… – and saying this he pulled out a map of the city he'd just bought, spread it on the table with a quick movement, and indicated several points in succession with his finger, – ...here, here and here. But I don't believe this is all of it.

– We are few, and certainly we can't comb through the city, house by house…

– Besides that, Abbacchio, if we stand out too much, we risk being quickly found by the organisation.

Giorno had a point. They shouldn't forget that the enemy would do everything they could to prevent their troublesome resistance. There was no time for this. Despite not knowing what were

TRACI

the organisation's plans, it was clear that they were planning to do something there at Venezia with Fugo's stand ability.

They needed to do something quickly.

Abbacchio and Giorno remained staring thoughtfully at the map, with folded arms. Buccellati turned to Mista:

– You still haven't told us everything. Right, Mista?

– Ha Ha! Of course, right? It's true, in reality I've yet to say the most interesting thing! – exclaimed Mista, surveying his companions gathered around the map.

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The 'most interesting thing' that Mista hadn't yet told was that in the central area of the Venetian Ghetto, near Ghetto Nuovo's square, there lived a certain old man.

They left the restaurant only to arrive at Canal Grande, where they got onto a boat and thus travelled northeast, towards Cannaregio.

Mista, who'd memorized Venezia's map, drove the boat, turning left and right through the narrow canals. According to the information he'd obtained, the old man mentioned before, who went by Seppia, was the one in control of all the arms trafficking, such as rifles and ammunition, as well as explosives and other dangerous weapons which arrived in Venezia. He was a capable guy who, in the organisation, held the position of capo. However, it seemed that the huge scale of the events that were taking place had frightened him and there was talk of his desire to drop everything.

– I heard those from the organisation were complaining because they had to go find another solution, so there's no mistake. Being in trouble, they'll try to convince Seppia, and I'm sure they won't do it by asking nicely. They'll tie him up like a salami and lock him up somewhere, but if we manage to get our hands on the old man first…

The boat came out again into the main canal, crossed it, and entered another canal that was right in front of the church of San Marcuola. The ghetto wasn't far away.

– Giorno, what's that dome thing? – asked Narancia, pointing towards the building seen ahead of them, to the left.

– That's San Geremia, and what resembles a dome is a Greek-cross church. Somewhat exotic, don't you think?

– But look at that, a place for prayer… I hoped it was for bowling.

– For… bowling?! – Giorno couldn't help a smile full of irony.

– Ya know, I'm not half bad at bowling, myself! – Narancia continued, mimicking the throw of a bowling ball.

At first glance he came out as a rather carefree person, and that was a huge mistake many made. In reality, while making such inane talk, Narancia hadn't stopped looking around to check the situation, and his eyes shone with a glimmer that only one who won numerous battles could hold.

The motorboat came to a slow stop.

Mista stood up and said to his companions:

– Here, this is it.

Old Seppia's dwelling was located some streets behind Ghetto Nuovo's square, on the ground floor of a decrepit building so run down it seemed the walls would collapse any time. At first it was hard to think of it as the residence of a capo from the organisation but, from another perspective, it also meant its occupant was someone who had no doubts about its safety.

– Well then, let's go!! – Mista yelled, kicking down the fragile door. While the sound of broken wood was still being heard, Mista broke into the house, rolling forward on the floor.

At that movement, Abbacchio and Buccellati, appearing simultaneously on the doorway, pointed their guns indoors. Between them the smaller one, Narancia, slid forward, carefully observing their surroundings.

– Aah!

Narancia let out a scream. A dark shadow had darted right in front of him.

– The enemy?!

What they found instead right in front of their guns was a black cat, looking just like he'd been interrupted in the middle of a nice nap.

– You bastard! Scared the hell out of me! – Narancia cried, kicking the cat. The animal nimbly dodged the hit and jumped out the open window, its presence gone quickly. It seemed to want to say it wanted nothing to do with any of this business.

The place was empty. There was a small carefully made bed, a table with a glass resting on top, and wine.

Everything was neat and tidy, something somewhat strange for an organisation's capo. But perhaps it was normal for an old person living alone.

– Damn! They got here first! – Mista exclaimed, nervous. Giorno bid him to keep calm.

– Let's try and see if we find something.

– It's pointless… – Abbacchio commented after taking a look at the nearest room.

– The TV is on, and given that there's still a half-eaten meal on the table it can only mean that old man Seppia was taken away by force while eating, don't you think?

– Then the organisation has really been much quicker… – commented Buccellati, who'd been listening to Abbacchio's words.

– And now?! What do we do now?!

– Shut your mouth, Narancia! We got Abbacchio's Moody Blues for this! – exclaimed Mista. Then, turning to Abbacchio:

– Right?

'MOODY BLUES'!

Moody Blues, Abbacchio's stand, wasn't a combat stand at all. When it came to destructive power and speed, it wasn't much different from an average man.

Yet it had a truly unique power. It could replay the past events of a person. Moody Blues was capable of taking on the appearance of someone denoted by Abbacchio, and 'rewinding' back the sequence of their actions just like a moviola. Afterwards it would go through all the events that occurred to that person in their stead, showing them to Abbacchio and his companions. The timer on Moody Blues' forehead indicated the time separating it from the present, and if Abbacchio commanded so, it could seek a specific action by speeding up the replay, or show another in slow motion. Ultimately, knowing the time and place where someone had been, this stand could go over anything they'd done. The plan was to succeed in following old man Seppia to wherever he'd been taken.

– I don't know the exact time in which I should look but, since he was eating, let's say around midday. Yeah, three hours ago. That should do it.

With that said, Abbacchio activated his stand, Moody Blues.

– Old Seppia who was in this room, three hours ago. Go, Moody Blues!

On that command, Moody Blues started twisting its body, which appeared as if made of smooth purple vinyl plastic, and shaping it like an old short man. Not a particularly enjoyable sight. Narancia would never dare say it but, to himself, he thought every time: *Blegh, so disgusting*, and could never get used to it.

In no time, before Buccellati and his companions, Moody Blues had turned into an old man with a hint of a moustache who, rubbing his bald head, peacefully watched television.

CAPITOLO TRE

She had woken up again.

She had come out of a dream where everything was black, so, when opening her eyes in the dark hospital room, she had the unpleasant feeling of still being in the nightmare.

She forced herself to open her heavy eyelids and accustom the eyes to the darkness. The ceiling and walls reflected a faint bluish light. She clutched in her hands the sheets and the pillow, feeling sweat down her neck, the hair stuck to her forehead, and the heated breaths continuously coming from her nostrils and mouth. She had vomited a lot, and her hot breath carried a faint rancid smell.

Her sweaty body let out a kind of sweet greasy odour, like that of a wild carnivore who had just caught its prey. It was then that she came to the realization that she was still alive.

Why am I still alive? I've lost my dearest friend. I could have reached out and helped her but instead I just watched. Now I'm here like an animal crouching in the dark, holding its breath. I'm still alive. I survived.

On the ceiling were grey stains, perhaps due to some water leak, and in the thin cracks rusted bits of metal peeked.

The darkness in that hospital room was putting a strain on her nerves.

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Who knows how much time had passed when the lights came back. When she came to, Coniglio found herself surrounded by a large number of men.

– Are you alright?

The policemen and members of the rescue team spoke to her, someone had patted her on the shoulder, pointed out the exit, then gone back to talking loudly with his colleagues and other uniformed men in frenzied activity. Still for Coniglio, sitting on the ground with an empty stare near Winona who by now had lost all human resemblance, all that commotion coming from those men with reddened faces seemed to belong to a distant reality, another country which had nothing to do with her.

When she left the hotel lobby, supported by one of them, she suddenly turned around to look. This was a place she knew well. For more than two months she had walked in there almost every day, had exchanged some words with newly arrived guests, had carried back and forth dozens of suitcases. And sometimes she had felt like talking to her mother, which made her approach the phone booth but, in the end, for some reason or another, she had never made it… It had been a brief period, there had been no other place where she'd felt more at ease than Hotel Mondo Aria's lobby.

And now, that place had turned into a nightmare.

On the sofa the bluish faced corpses of a couple seemed to lean into one another; tumbled onto the reception counter was the body of one of the attendants; further ahead, the crushed one of an elderly gentleman who must have been slammed hard against the wall. From under the fallen chandelier

white feet stuck out, and the floor was flooded with a pool of dark blood. From that blood she could still make out wisps of purple smoke rising like some smoke signal which dissipated in the air.

Too many faces, too much blood, too many legs and arms, too many dead.

One of the rescue team members near Coniglio could no longer bear that bloodcurdling sight and had started to vomit onto the floor.

– Don't throw up on the scene! Get out! – someone shouted with anger.

In that moment she became painfully aware of the blaring sound of the sirens, the blinding flashes which shone from all over the place, the men's yells, the clamour of curious onlookers. She heard the shrill voice of a woman, probably a journalist, bemoaning how she couldn't see a thing. And then again noise, so much noise. A deluge of noise suddenly poured on her. And finally she came to notice the tears, which had kept flowing from her eyes.

Why am I not dead as well, when this all happened?

Shortly after, she had been brought onto a water ambulance and taken to one of the city's hospitals. In the city of Venezia, wheeled vehicles aren't allowed. The use of cars and motorcycles is forbidden, and because of this there are no ambulances or other emergency vehicles on wheels.

– If you hadn't been a witness of the incident, I could've sent you home straight away – laughed the handsome young doctor who had been given the task of checking up on her.

Naturally it was unthinkable that they would let her go home so easily. On her medical records they had written that "the patient is in a severe state of shock" and that "she needs absolute rest for a certain period of time". Afterwards, she had been moved to the top floor of that old hospital. Just like the young doctor had said, Coniglio was in a condition of impeccable health.

Her hospitalization, in short, had been used only to allow the police to question her in complete peace. As a matter of fact, less than an hour had passed since two police investigators had shown up, a young one and a middle aged one, with an extraordinary resemblance to Lieutenant Columbo from the TV show, raincoat and all. Even the young one seemed like someone she'd already seen somewhere but, perhaps, it was all in her head.

The inquiries which 'Lieutenant Columbo' made during that visit were of a surprising simplicity. He had wanted to know what had happened at the hotel. That was it. This single matter repeated ad nauseam in a string of countless variations.

"Where were you?", "why were you there?", "Did you see anyone who looked suspicious?" and so on. Reading between the words of such repetitive queries, she had figured that the police had absolutely nothing to go on to resolve this case. She could have no idea how many people were victims of that massacre, but one thing alone was clear to her: it must have surely been something big. While answering 'Columbo's' pedantic questions, the memory of that blond guy crossed her mind for a moment. The one clad in moss-green she had seen at the hotel lobby. Him, with that strange purple creature who stood behind him, that seemed out of a superhero comic book.

And yet she said nothing.

She was unable to explain the reason for this even to herself.

Actually, Coniglio had no idea of what had happened at the hotel lobby. Neither she wanted to know. When trying to remember, the first thing that came to her mind was the smiling face of her friend Winona.

"Have you already found a substitute for Leoni?"

She had said that, tapping her on the shoulder, and then she had laughed. Her dear friend's last laugh. Every time she remembered she felt something tighten inside. A sharp pain, a heavy weight on her heart.

I could have helped her she thought. *And instead… Instead I couldn't do anything!!* She felt the weight of remorse. And clenched her fists.

And yet I survived. Why?

Why only me?

Coniglio was lying on the bed. Next to her chest, The Cure briskly wiggled its nose. With tiny steps it moved towards her face and, right under the chin, stretched its nuzzle to touch her with the mouth in something like a kiss. The small blue gemstones on the backs of its paws shone.

Coniglio knew full well the answer the answer to the questions she kept asking.

It's him. It was this creature who saved my life.

Almost as if capable of understanding the whispers of this girl's soul, The Cure turned its snout up towards Coniglio's face and nodded its head in semblance of an affirmative answer.

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It happened roughly when Coniglio was finishing elementary school.

The most tomboyish girl in the area had turned into a 'young lady', even if this expression in itself seems like a contradiction.

At that point she was no longer fighting with the bullies of the neighbourhood, nor going around playing games that made her return home with her clothes torn to shreds. Her hair was a lot longer and now were kept tied in a ponytail. She looked like a random girl, like any other.

No. Calling her a 'random girl like any other' would be making a mistake.

If anyone called her on the street, she'd greet back with a magnificent smile, and it wasn't just one or two boys who had a crush on her.

And yet, during elementary school Coniglio had always been a lonely child. After school she would go straight home and close herself in her room reading until late at night. Nancy Drew, Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie's detective novels… Or she would look at fashion magazines or reread comic books with The Adventures of Tintin to no end.

The reasons that let her to retreat into her shell were two.

One was the parents' divorce. They decided to live separately when Coniglio was about to start elementary school. She didn't know the reason behind it.

When she was younger they all went together to watch sci-fi films at the cinema, from Spielberg or similar, and occasionally they even went to watch the game at the stadium. However, at some point, for some reason, her parents had stopped talking to each other and the only thing she could remember was how her older brother had bent over backwards trying to patch things up between the two.

In vain.

In the end came the divorce, and the result was that the two siblings, known in the neighbourhood for being inseparable, had to live in different houses.

Looking back at things now, it's not like it had been such an unusual thing. After high school, when she had started doing some odd jobs in the grocery store or in some fast-food place, she came to realize the number of families divided by divorce was actually quite high. Yet at the time, when she was still going to elementary school, for Coniglio her parents' divorce had been a blow that had sent her entire world upside down.

Thinking better, it wasn't the fact that dad and mom were living separately that was the motive for shock. In her family, as often happens, both parents worked. The father held a key position at a medium-sized brokerage firm, the mother was deputy manager of a large car dealership. They met by chance, they started being together without any particular reason, they probably got married by sheer inertness, then the children had come… If she told this interpretation, her mother would probably have smoke coming out of her ears in rage. The truth is, however, that day after day the hearts of these two extremely busy people had ceased communicating. In the end, a story a bit too much like so many others.

Thinking about it, in hindsight, the biggest problem that the divorce had brought was the fact that she had to live away from her older brother.

It was him who had always taken care of Coniglio when she came from school. It was him who heated the stew, or whatever meal their mother left before leaving, and who ate with her. It was him who sang with his rough English the songs of whichever rock band he was fond of at the time. Her 'family' time was essentially all the time she spent with her brother.

And he would never be there again.

Without her brother the home gave a strong feeling of emptiness…

Indeed, just like the hotel rooms after a guest's departure… And her, until her mother's return, spent the time in a way that could have been described as *dull* , going back and forth through those empty rooms, like someone searching for the last puzzle piece and, before realizing it, she ended up searching for where her brother's presence could be. She felt very troubled that, no matter what she did, she could never get used to that life with her mother.

The second reason was her stand, The Cure.

It had been during Physical Education, in middle school, when her best friend had scratched her knee. Coniglio told someone about The Cure for the first time.

– You probably can't see it, but when I approach him like this with my hand, the wound heals before your eyes.

It was her biggest secret. She had disclosed it only because she considered her a close friend. From Coniglio's point of view it was a small show of friendship.

– It will be our secret, only yours and mine! – she had whispered in an ear, and then bade The Cure to lick her graze. The creature looked around and licked the wound as if it found it to be a very funny thing.

– Here, now it's all patched up – she had told afterwards, bringing up her smiling eyes to her friend's face, but what she saw was a horrified look and an expression of pure terror.

– ...Thanks, Coniglio… but now, now stop it!

And while she said it, her friend's voice was shaking.

And me thinking I was doing something nice…

Observing the friend who was running back to class, she somewhat regretted what she had done. Especially because she considered her a friend, a friend she cared about, she had gained the courage to confide in her.

But the school environment isn't very agreeable with letting such a story end with mere regret.

Before the end of the day, all throughout the school there was talk about Coniglio's mysterious ability (which her friend deemed 'revolting'). Among those who knew Coniglio since childhood, had come forth those who remembered *Coni l'immortale*, who always returned home without a scratch, regardless of how many beatings she took, and thus she became *Coni la strega*[6], and it was only a matter of time for the adjectives joined to her name to take increasingly nastier forms.

Her classmates had started openly avoiding her, and the circle of her closest friends (including the girl she had healed) too had begun to keep their distance. The friends with whom she usually spent break time, would all disappear from their seats as soon as the bell rang, and whenever she tried to make plans to go out shopping or something, no one would go.

At first Coniglio didn't quite understand what was happening. She had never thought her power would scare someone, and even tried to find an excuse in the fact that, being unable to see it, they wouldn't ever think The Cure was that cute.

[6] T.N: literally "Coni the witch".

Still the name of witch with which she had been branded would never leave her up until the end of high school. The only thing which a high school life filled with misery had taught her, was that people always fear that which they do not know, even if it might turn out to be something good.

This had made her feel very poorly. And the only one who she could have asked for advice, her brother, was now no longer with her.

It probably had been these two reasons, happening together during one of the most delicate moments of growing up, that ended up radically changing Coniglio.

She had stopped trying to hang out with friends and had started to close herself in her room. To whomever talked to her, she seemed the usual 'beaming girl of always'.

She had kept going to school almost as some sort of statement, and during the occasional jobs, she always committed to the maximum. However she no longer tried to open her heart to someone. She had started building a wall around herself and disguised it with smiles which prevented others from noticing.

The magical white bunny continued to stand by her, but she never again asked it to use its powers on others. She didn't want to see a horrified look like the one she saw in her friend ever again.

Like this she started spending her time in the empty brotherless house, in the company of her small white rabbit that no one could see. A small empty locked house. Not even the mother could tell what was going on in Coniglio's heart.

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At night the hospital became submerged in a dead silence.

She turned on the lamp and started browsing through the fashion magazines her mother had brought. When she looked at the clock, it was already past midnight.

Today has been an awful day. A lot of things happened that I don't ever want to remember again.

She didn't feel pain and had stopped vomiting once and for all for a while already, but that weight that had landed in her chest gave no signs of wanting to leave.

I must stop thinking about it she muttered to herself, reaching a hand to switch off the light.

It was then that The Cure, which up to that moment had remained curled up near her pillow, leaped out of the bed and ran straight to the entrance of the room. She followed it with her eyes and saw it stop before the door, then turn towards her. The Cure stayed there staring at her, as if trying to tell her something.

– What is it? – she asked, knowing full well it wouldn't answer if not with a movement of its head. Resigned, she got out of the bed and approached the creature.

No sooner had she reached it than The Cure passed through the door in an instant and got out of her sight.

– Don’t tell me you want to play tag at this late hour of the night…

What a spoiled rabbit… Doesn’t it get how I’m feeling? All I want is to go to sleep and forget everything that happened today, and instead… ugh!

She opened the door and entered the corridor.

The moonlight entering through the large windows seemed almost dazzling.

At the end she could see the corridor for traversing the building where the visitors’ and the seriously ill patients’ wings were located. The Cure awaited her there. Its white fur shone almost translucent under the moon’s light. The gemstones of its ears and small paws, as well as of its head, shone in the shadow spreading blue reflections.

Coniglio approached and again The Cure, as if wanting to be chased after, fled to the end of the corridor and turned left. It was the hospital wing reserved for patients in critical conditions. The girl rushed straight to the small animal.

Suddenly a fresh scent of mint came to her nose.

This smell…

As if it had read her mind, The Cure suddenly straightened up its big ears and seemed to fix its gaze in the darkness at the end of that corridor.

Raising her gaze in the direction the small rabbit seemed to be pointing out, she made out the silhouette of a young man, faintly lit by the weak light of an emergency sign.

But… that…

She was certain there was no mistake. It was the same person she had seen at the hotel.

That hair which looked like it had been messed up by the wind, that somewhat ambiguous look. Seen from where Coniglio stood, with the faint hospital lights behind, he looked like a character from the shadow theatre she had seen so many years ago on television. And yet his particularities had remained so imprinted in her mind that she had no doubts this was indeed him.

Why? What is he doing here?

In the moment that question took to cross her mind, the young man’s shadow was already gone.

She rushed to where she’d seen him, but could no longer even find his shadow. The only trace he left behind was that kind of sweet smell of mint which refreshed her breath.

Suddenly, the door behind her was loudly thrown open.

– Uuuuh, uuuuh, uuuuh!

It had been slammed open by a monster wearing striped pyjamas and making a cry like that of the firefighter’s siren mimicked by a small child.

She couldn’t make out if he had always been so fat or if that unnatural swelling was caused by whatever evil assailed him. His body was covered in multiple large swellings. The hand with which he had tried to hold onto the door slipped and the man fell heavily on the ground with a thud. On

the door, where the hand had laid, were left dark streaks of his blood. That black imprint was like an alarm bell ringing as loud as it could in her brain.

Again! The same thing is happening again!

Coniglio got closer to try to help the man in pyjamas get up, but he shook his head with his neck, just like how a baby would when trying to say no, and tried to stretch out on the floor where he started slamming his hands hard. Two, three times, then there was a disturbing sound and the man's right thumb literally exploded, splattering everything around. A fragment landed on Coniglio's face. Just like how it had been with Winona. The black blood, in contact with the air, emanated purple vapours which quickly thinned out.

– Mister! Speak! What happened to you?!

No sooner had she taken his shoulders to shake him than she heard a loud noise, like broken glass, coming from the next room. Then, something heavy was being dragged.

At the hotel it was exactly the same thing! Here too something is attacking the patients!

It was her second time going through this, so she didn't hesitate.

She pushed The Cure, which she had been hugging close to her chest, toward the man's feet, and raced to see what was going on in the other room.

Thankfully the number of patients hospitalized in critical condition in that wing was not high. Five in three rooms. The man in pyjamas from just now, an old man with plenty of tubes coming from all over his body with a woman who was assisting him and, in the next room, two girls still at an early age. All had succumbed to the same symptoms.

The unpleasant sweet smell of rotting fruit, hands and feet bloated and covered in swellings, bluish black liquid oozing from several parts of the body. All were screaming in terrible inhuman screeches, and feverishly scratched themselves only to have their skin torn away, leaving on display the already rotting flesh which pulsed underneath.

At the hotel… Yes, with Winona it was exactly the same thing.

She returned to the man in pyjamas. He was still a bit in pain but The Cure seemed to have finished sucking out the toxins. His appearance had mostly returned to normal. He was left with some excoriations on his face, but the worst was over.

– This one's next!

Coniglio prompted The Cure, seeing that the old man was in critical condition. At those words the small rabbit moved. It crossed the corridor and darted into the next room at a speed never seen before.

The Cure leaned its mouth directly over that of the old man's who, no longer able to stand the heat, was leaking sweat and nauseating liquids all over his body, and started leeching away his torment. The movement of his hand which up to a moment ago had been violently hitting the bed, slowly calmed down while his laboured breath also regained a normal rhythm.

However, while busying over him, the woman beside, fallen near the bed, let out a wail and began crumbling away before their eyes. A pool of dark blood started spreading over the floor right below her. With the rush, Coniglio ended up with one of her slippers in it and risked slipping.

– Quickly! Quickly!

In return The Cure rushed over that third victim.

Its speed in leeching seemed noticeably faster compared to that used in the man in pyjamas.

If we keep going like this, maybe we'll save everyone… Actually, no, I'm sure! We'll save them all!

Coniglio, for the first time in her life, was trying to use to the utmost the gift she had been granted, and which from elementary school onwards had tried to keep hidden.

CAPITOLO QUATTRO

The timer on Moody Blues' forehead counted back until it showed exactly three hours before, then it stopped. Buccellati, Giorno, and Abbacchio positioned themselves around it, when a shadow approached behind their backs.

Buccellati and Giorno immediately noticed it and prepared to defend Moody Blues, who was already by nature not a combat stand, but in that instant, in the middle of visually replaying the past, was completely helpless. Due to this, Buccellati and Giorno were more than ready for a situation that called for its protection.

– Where's Narancia?

The question came from a girl whose hair was dyed green and gathered in large curls at the top of her head. The look on her face had something of childlike in it, not yet completely that of a woman's. She had her lips parted in a bit of an arrogant expression, upturned nose, and two large eyes of the same shining green as that with which she dyed her hair. Her outfit was so sexy that simply looking at her would make your heart skip a beat. She wore an extremely tight tank top which highlighted her plump shapely breasts, in addition to a square patterned skirt which came with a generous slit from which, occasionally, two beautiful slender legs could be seen in passing.

She was so beautiful that if meeting her on the street, it would be difficult to refrain from complimenting her in some way. Trying to do so, however, would mean risking it ending badly, because she was the one who Buccellati and his group were risking their lives trying to protect. She was Trish Una, the daughter of Passione's Boss.

– Ah, Trish, it was you! – Giorno blurted out with a look of pure relief.

At Trish's feet sat a turtle, unmoving, hidden up in its shell.

They came into possession of the Turtle while on their journey to Venezia, under the Boss's orders.

It was so old it moved little enough to seem fake. Anyone who would look at it scarcely moving, with its sleepy eyes, would never guess that creature was also a stand user.

However, when looking closely, the differences from a normal turtle were there.

First of all, the strangely shaped groove it had on its back, in the middle of the shell. All you needed was to insert a particular key in it, and everyone near the turtle would be immediately pulled into it. If you put the key in that opening, the space surrounding the animal pulsed with a glow and moved as if the key sucked it in, making the people closest by disappear. No one had ever been able to understand by what logic this could happen, but what was certain was that the Turtle's stand was perfectly capable of hiding and transporting in all safety in its interior at least six adults. The room was furnished with a couch and other old-fashioned furniture. There was even a fridge to keep the champagne cold, as well as other food reserves. All in all, it was possible to comfortably spend a day in there.

For Buccellati and his companions, who operated while trying not to be found by members of Passione, the Turtle was the ideal hiding place. No one would ever imagine that six people were well hidden inside that small animal.

– What kind of answer is "Ah, Trish, it was you!". I need Narancia. I asked him to do a thing for me.

– Narancia's outside now…

Mista and Narancia, respectively in front of the door and on the roof of old Seppia's house, were staking out the place to prevent the enemy from coming back and catching them by surprise. Narancia's stand, Aerosmith, had a radar capable of identifying sources of carbon dioxide in a radius of fifty metres around him, and this allowed him to keep the movements of every lunged being around him under observation and thus identify any danger.

To that answer, Trish started throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child.

– What do you mean? And what am I supposed to do, I, without my fishnet stockings?! I've been wearing the same for four days! You can't expect me to continue...

Her venting was interrupted by Buccellati.

– Trish, as you can see, right now this place could be *very* dangerous. Could you do us the favour of going back into the Turtle like a good girl?

Saying this, Buccellati pointed out the animal which had moved by the room's door, almost like it wanted to hide itself.

After betraying Passione, for Buccellati and his companions, Trish had become their trump card, an extremely important presence.

Their enemy was not only the Boss. Other than him and his fearsome stand, members from other organisations all over Italia also wanted to get their hands on them. To successfully escape this situation of extreme danger, their only hope was to find out Boss's identity and then try to eliminate him.

The main problem was that this man's identity, the one who had kept pulling the organisation's strings throughout many years, wasn't known to anyone. The Boss had spent a large part of his recent life meticulously erasing every trace of his past, which also included anyone who could provide any clue or any witnesses. The only person who had a connection to him, who had miraculously escaped this carnage spread over time, was Trish herself. Thanks to her, perhaps it was possible to find a way to get closer to the Boss's past.

For now, the girl was unable to remember anything about her father, but it was understandable that Buccellati was quite nervous for fear that someone could find out about her.

Trish didn't seem at all willing to back down before Buccellati's cold words. She proudly returned him a cold look and, with a puff from her nose, resumed her talk, with a clear note of anger in her voice.

– It's true, here is dangerous. And I also get that you're doing the impossible to protect me, but you can't… – she caught her breath. Her green eyes fulminated in anger, – you can't keep me out because of this. This is *my* problem too! A father whose face I've never even seen is something that concerns me directly, whether you want it or not!

To those words Buccellati could find nothing to reply.

– I don't want to sit here and wait for the moment of truth to arrive locked up in this Turtle! I don't want to be trembling in fear all the time expecting an encounter that could mean my death. Even if it's a risk, I want to keep seeing what's happening around me with my own eyes!

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– Do you mind giving it a rest, signorina? If possible, I'd like to start the *replay*.

It was Abbacchio who put the glaring contest between the two to an end.

– Tsk! – clicked Buccellati's tongue, but he let it go.

Abbacchio continued, addressing Trish who kept throwing angry looks at the group leader.

– You know, I don't think this is quite the right moment for arguing between us.

As answer, Trish turned her eyes away from Buccellati but showed no intention of going back into the Turtle.

– Fine. But I stay here too – she decided.

– ...Sure, Trish – Giorno replied in Buccellati's stead, who for his part had already turned towards Abbacchio.

– They're anticipating our every move. We if don't do something right now, we risk being hopelessly left behind. Just try not to forget that.

– Yes, yes… I know!

– Now enough bickering. Let's start!

No sooner said than done. Abbacchio started Moody Blues's recording.

When the organisation's hired killers had broken into his house, old Seppia had been about to eat his late breakfast. It was fried fish leftovers from the day before with thinly sliced bread, alongside a tea sent as a gift by his nephew who lived in England. He had turned on the television. His favourite team's match had been about to begin. He had been sitting anxiously on the chair and had reached out his hand towards the heated fried food.

It was right then that his house had been broken into. Reflexively, Seppia had screamed:

– What do you people want?!

To tell the truth, he hadn't been very surprised. He had known very well that this would happen. It was just a matter of time. Still he would have rather they hadn't done it right in the middle of his breakfast!

He had been forced to get up from his chair and to move towards the door. He felt the stiff barrel of a gun sticking in his back, and wasn't dumb enough to try to go against an armed member of the organisation. He had raised both hands to bring them behind the head and meekly let himself be led to the street. Outside, right there on the canal, was a moored boat. They had probably arrived in it. The rim was very low, as if it held something incredibly heavy aboard. When Seppia and the others had gotten in, it had swayed dangerously.

– Good, stop there for a moment.

Buccellati and his companions had followed Moody Blues up to the edge of the canal outside Seppia's house. Mista immediately saw it and hurried to join them.

– As I thought, he was taken away on boat.

– Indeed. Do me a favour, Mista, bring the boat here.

Mista went to go get the boat right away. He noticed a group of curious kids who were watching and snarled at them:

– Hey, brats! This isn't a show!

The kids were gone in a flash.

– There was no reason to be so upset… – Narancia commented, getting down from the roof.

– For now, no suspicious movement – he finished, while a miniature fighter jet circled around his head. Its tiny windows reflected the sunlight.

That was Narancia's stand, Aerosmith. At first glance it looked just like a plain radio-controlled model aircraft, but the projectiles it fired were capable of wounding or killing a grown man. In terms of precision it wasn't the best, suffice to say it sprayed bullets like a madman. If targeted by his machine guns, neither man nor stand would have high hopes of escaping.

– Oi, let's hurry on!

Mista quickly accosted the motorboat. First Trish, then Buccellati, Giorno, Abbacchio, and finally Narancia hurried aboard.

– Ok, we can resume from where we left off!

Buccellati had his eyes glued to Moody Blues's movements, which was sitting in the middle of the boat. His expression was one of extreme concentration.

Interpreting every little movement or expression of Moody Blues, Buccellati indicated the way to go: "the next right corner!", "now left!".

The boat, thanks to Mista's precise driving, followed such directions perfectly. Their teamwork and coordination resembled that of a group of people which had worked for many years together. The shadows of the buildings on both sides of the canals they sailed down were reflected on the water surface. The churches' belfries had kept their watch over Venezia since long before they were born. Gothic, Baroque, Byzantine… Structures of various styles passed by at an incredible

speed and went on to vanish behind their backs. Dirt-coloured bricks, gorgeous mosaics, stained glass windows which were dyed orange in the vibrant sunset light. Their boat sailed swiftly between a series of beautiful buildings which, had its passengers been tourists, would have been motive for innumerous stops, among plenty of enchanted sighs.

At Mista's right, sitting on the driver's seat, was Narancia, checking their surroundings with his Aerosmith to prevent enemy attacks. Suddenly he exclaimed:

– What?! I don't get it, this is weird…

Mista asked him in return:

– What did you pick up that's weird?

He gave the impression of someone who was about to start humming a song. The peaceful breeze coming from the water put him at ease.

– Well, erhm… it's the radar…

Saying this, Narancia started tapping the radar viewer, which he had placed over his right eye, with his finger.

On its screen were a number of red dots which kept increasing. Each dot represented something which expelled carbon dioxide. Each red dot corresponded to a living breathing being. And, from the size of the dot, he could even tell the quantity of carbon dioxide emitted.

When they left, there were almost no dots showing up around the boat but, strangely enough, after roughly thirty minutes of hunting down old Seppia, the red dots started multiplying to no end.

– Maybe I ate something bad?

It was the first time Narancia had seen such a phenomenon. At that moment, the boat ended up being surrounded by a huge amount of blinking red dots.

– It really is strange!

No sooner had Mista finished saying those words than things started happening.

Almost in the same instant, Trish noticed the change that occurred in Moody Blues.

– It almost looks like he's arguing with his kidnappers!

Truth be told, Moody Blues, who up to that moment had been sitting in the centre of the boat without reacting, was talking… And his behaviour, while excitedly talking with his 'kidnappers' was exactly the opposite of the downcast and nearly frightened one he had kept until just shortly before.

– He's begging to be spared?... – Giorno wondered aloud, observing Moody Blues' movements.

– I don't think so, but… what's going on, Giorno?

– That small floater… Looks like polystyrene to me, however… – he had just started answering at Buccellati, but was suddenly interrupted.

– Aah! What's going on?! – Mista yelled out while driving. Buccellati turned around and saw the pleasure craft charging at high speed towards them. They could see it getting closer and closer.

– Watch out! – Mista yelled again, turning right to avoid the collision by a hair's breadth. The pleasure boat's pilot was surprised enough to let go off the wheel for a moment, yelling something at them like he was completely out of his mind.

– What's happening, Buccellati? That boat just suddenly showed up out of thin air! – Mista yelled out, not taking his eyes off the course, turning the wheel left to forcefully correct their trajectory.

– Mista! This is the work of the enemy! Watch out! They're coming again! – Giorno replied to him ahead of Buccellati.

– Look!

At Abbacchio's call, everyone's eyes came to land on Moody Blues.

In that particular moment, Moody Blues had climbed onto a chair and was giving orders, referring to the men in the boat one by one. After those orders it seemed that the cargo was being unloaded, such that the boat swayed energetically.

With the abrupt motions, Moody Blues, that is, old Seppia, shouted in the direction of the sailors at the risk of losing balance:

– That mine goes here! That goes on the right!

– ...Mine? What does it mean?

At that word which unexpectedly left Moody Blues' mouth, the boys suddenly felt their blood run cold.

– Aaah! – Mista yelled from his driver's seat. After the pleasure craft, what suddenly showed up in front of their boat was a spherical object, of a black colour, and which had none too reassuring spikes that spread like those of a hedgehog all over its surface. It *really* was a mine! If by mistake they were to run into it, it would be the end of the story. As soon as he realized this, Mista quickly turned the wheel to the left.

– We won't make it in time!

Mista let go off the rudder and got his hands on his gun.

– I'm counting on you, No. 1 and No. 2! – he called out, shooting in the direction of the mine. On the tip of the bullets, what seemed like a pair of tiny metal figurines, were clinging on.

– Leave it to us, bro!

– Yaa-hoo! – yelled the tiny people. They were two units of Mista's stand, Sex Pistols.

In short, Sex Pistols could change the course of bullets shot from Mista's gun as they please. There were six of them, but numbered from one to seven: this because Mista held the belief that the number four brought him bad luck. Making use of their speed and small size of their bodies, Sex

Pistols literally rode the bullets in mid-air, to then direct them to any target, including those hidden behind obstacles, or even hitting on the back an enemy facing them.

A perfect stand for a professional killer.

All in all, expecting to hit a mine after shooting from a wildly lurching moving boat, even for someone as capable as Mista, wouldn't be an easy feat. However, with Sex Pistols's power…

The bullet, after straying from the trajectory with a tight arch, went to perfectly hit the mine's detonator. An instant later a column of water rose with uproar.

– Yeeah!

– Take that!

– Ooff, by a hair…

With a sigh of relief, Mista wiped the sweat off his brow.

– Mista! It's not time for a break yet! – Narancia called from the side. His finger pointed towards the many mines once again appearing on the water surface by where up to then only the polystyrene floated. In a hurry, he turned off the engine, but it was too late.

– Shit! I'm counting on you guys! – Mista called out then, firing several shots in the mines' direction.

– Here I go!

– Woah!

– Yaaa-hooo! – yelled in respectively the following units of Sex Pistols which came out together with the bullets. And then, one after the other, thus exploded the mines. The high waves raised by this caused the boat to sway heavily.

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Old Seppia was the other identity of Sogliola Lopez, at the top of the top among those commanding the gangs across all of Venezia. He held in his hands control over all the weapons and explosives entering the city, as well as gambling at the casino, and movement of dirty money with which he kept his minions' loyalty under control. And playing both sides was exactly how he was able to keep everyone's movements in close check, from street thugs to his closest associates, leading up to the one at the top of that criminal society, known to tend towards treachery.

It had been only a few days earlier that he'd received direct orders from the Boss.

– The group of traitors led by Buccellati is in Venezia. They are to be eliminated immediately. Use whatever means necessary.

Sogliola had checked his email as usual, but no sooner had he glanced at that particular message than his expression had turned into a frown.

Right here and now, while we're busy bending over backwards to keep those police shitheads happy…

Venezia was located in a border area with respect to the centre of the criminal organisation network which extended over all of Italia. The major casinos' administration and the more important affairs got done in the middle of the peninsula, and the Venezian gangs, to tell the truth, were left to deal with less than pleasant jobs. In addition, the fact that the city was among the most visited touristic points of all of Italia made it so the police checks were much more strict and frequent than in other cities. Sogliola's greatest job, more than managing important businesses, was valued for the ability with which he managed police relationships.

Sogliola, trying to keep down the anger he felt rising to his head, kept reading the message.

"P.S.: Pannacotta Fugo will come to you this afternoon. He was part of Buccellati's group. He can tell you what are his ex-companions' attributes and their modus operandi. You will settle this matter as quickly as possible with his cooperation".

As soon as he had finished reading the message, Sogliola angrily turned off his desktop.

All their troubles end up being passed on to us! But, this is a direct order from the Boss. If I do everything right, I might be promoted and rise up a few more steps… he had thought, scratching his unshaven chin full of wrinkles. Then, as if something had come to mind, he made a resolute reach for the desk phone with his hand.

The whole plan had been constructed by Sogliola.

He had spread false information, and the idea was to finish the prey when it had taken the bait, after running it straight into a trap. For the coup de grâce, he could have used Fugo's stand ability, that purple kind of monster called Purple Haze, terrific even just from hearing about it. Or not. The problem, in any case, was what to use as bait. Buccellati and his companions had already managed to escape an amazing amount of cases, and luring them out to the open hadn't been an easy feat.

The time to show what I can do has come Sogliola muttered to himself. He too, like Buccellati and the others, was a stand user.

His stand ability, Joy Division, consisted in exchanging the positions of objects it touched.

For example, if he had a die in his right hand and a banana in the left, he could instantaneously make the banana be at the die's place and vice versa. Or even, if in his right hand he held a bible, while the left was empty, in a split second he could move the bible to the free hand. It was an ability perhaps more suitable for stage performances but, as long as he came into possession of it, he was capable of displacing essentially any object.

Besides, with time, he had also developed the ability to make the displaced objects appear not only at his desired place, but also at his desired *time* .

He had lost his parents when he was still young and had tried to make a living through pickpocketing and rigged gambling. His stand, discovered more by pure necessity than by mere chance, was almost a physical manifestation of his personality.

The minefield assailing Buccellati and his companions had been arranged by use of this exact same ability.

He had predicted that, as soon as they heard the rumours about the old Seppia, they would use Abbacchio's Moody Blues to follow the kidnapped old man's trail. All that would be left was to scatter the mines on that path and, with Joy Division's power, switch their places with something else at the right moment. Anything capable of floating would be ideal. Sogliola had chosen polystyrene broken into small pieces.

I'd love for those who laughed at my power, saying it was worthless, to watch this!

Using the same system he had taken out many rivals which had troubled him. Thinking back on such occasions, he held back the impulse to laugh out loud. This wasn't the moment for it yet. The hardest part had yet to come. Until he could see the dead bodies of his enemies floating on the canal, he shouldn't get distracted. Not yet…

– It's not that that brat, that Pannacotta Fugo, inspires much trust, from listening to him, the stand abilities of Buccellati's group members aren't to be taken lightly. With their perfect teamwork they overcame many challenges, but… Who knows if it'll be good enough to overcome my trap. We'll see what they can do. And then… – Sogliola muttered by himself, as he watched the setting sun sink to the sea, standing on the entrance of Venezia's most famous church.

– ...And then, even if they somehow get past the minefield, an even worse trap is already ready for them…

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The boat of Buccellati and his companions, its engine idling, let itself be pulled by the canal's current. Around it the swarm of ominous black and shiny mines was cradled by small waves.

It left the large canal that crossed the centre of the city and entered a much smaller one. Twice as many mines, or perhaps trice, prevented its passage. Giving them no time to think, almost as if to make fun of them, another suddenly appeared there, black and menacing, right next to their boat.

– There's nothing we can do! We won't be able to get rid of them all, no matter how much we shoot!

To deal with all the mines that kept showing up without a break, the firepower of Narancia's Aerosmith had been added to Sex Pistols's. This latter didn't have Sex Pistols's precision to hit the detonator but, to compensate, could shoot in burst for a certain range.

Despite their valiant efforts, Buccellati and his group were then completely at their enemy's mercy. There was no longer the need to think about pursuing old Seppia. Theirs was a desperate situation.

Surrounded by mines they had no idea where and when they could show up again, driving the boat had become impossible. Whenever they were about to attempt mooring, a large mine would suddenly appear before them, preventing it.

Besides, for fear of getting civilians involved in the explosions, they wouldn't consider blowing them all up.

– How many more mines did they put until they were satisfied with it?! – Mista complained, shooting at that which suddenly appeared right in front of the boat's bow. A large column of water rose, making them sway heavily. The onlookers that had shown up to see what was going on holed themselves back up in their homes and closed the windows from such a fright.

– Enough, Narancia! Mista, stop the boat!

At Buccellati's orders, the boat slowed to a stop. Despite that, fearing the arrival of new mines, Narancia and Mista didn't stop from looking around nervously.

– What are you planning, Buccellati? – asked Abbacchio with a surprised look.

– The enemy also has a stand, right? – Mista replied from the driver's seat, turning to Abbacchio who sat behind.

– I think so too. This wouldn't be explainable otherwise – said Giorno, keeping watch from the stern for any enemy moves from that side.

– With all this noise, it seems like the police is also going to get involved. I think I'm hearing their patrol boats' sirens.

– It seems like the enemy knows how to make things appear however he likes – Buccellati commented. All agreed.

– He's scattering these mines all over the place with his stand!

– Right! It's like there's no end to them! – replied Narancia, looking rather tired due to the intensive use he'd been giving his Aerosmith.

– Indeed… – Buccellati agreed to Narancia's comment, and added:

– But I have a strong feeling the enemy is trying to lead us somewhere.

– Lead us? – Giorno asked in response to Buccellati.

– Have you noticed? The mines' layout isn't constant. In some places they're very concentrated, while in others you almost don't see them…

– Indeed… – Mista replied, convinced by Buccellati's words.

– This means that they're not spreading them randomly. It looks like they're sending us for a walk around the canals but that's not it. I didn't realize it earlier because I was so busy thinking about how to avoid the mines but… if you look carefully, now we are near Campo Sant'Angelo. Look over there.

In the direction pointed by Mista, beyond a series of magnificent buildings, could be seen a brown bell tower with a hexagonal belfry. At its peak sat a thin cross which seemed to be made of solid gold, and besides it another bell tower with white arched windows could be seen.

– But that's the bell tower of Santo Stefano's church! It's behind the canal that passes through Campo Sant'Angelo!

– You’re great, Mista! – Narancia exclaimed enthusiastically.

– It was really worth all this trouble going in circles on the boat through Venezia! – Mista answered back, rubbing his nose to hide the slight embarrassment.

– It means that the Venetian girls have been good tour guides! – Abbacchio interjected.

– This means we’ve sailed all the way to the south of the city, right, Buccellati?

– Exactly, Giorno. I have no idea what those behind this mine trap have on their mind, but what is certain is that they *wanted* us to end up here.

Buccellati made a short pause, and then went on. – And the final destination they want to lead us to, perhaps… – he started saying, turning towards a large bell tower which dwarfed all others in size. It was a brick-coloured tower reaching to the skies which had started to darken. Its black triangular roof stood out clearly in the evening shadows. – ... it’s Piazza San Marco!

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– It seems like Buccellati and the others have become aware of your trap!

Saying this, the blond boy left the shadows of a pillar.

– Oh. Fugo the traitor. Aren’t you early? – commented Sogliola, who was watching the sun set standing on the staircase of San Marco's basilica, without the slightest surprise at the sudden apparition of the boy at his back.

The sound of explosions that until then had reverberated around the city had stopped. Instead, now the sirens of water ambulances and police motorboats could be heard. If the police had started acting, it was easy to think the battle had already gotten onto the next stage.

– By the way… – Sogliola suddenly changed the subject, – The business from last night at the hospital… The attack was successful?

– …

– Your silence can only mean that things didn’t go through *exactly* as expected, right?

Obviously Sogliola had already gotten a detailed report from his men about the attack at the hospital.

Fugo’s task had been to spread Purple Haze’s virus again where ‘the girl’ had been hospitalized and making it so her powers would be awakened. According to his men’s report, instead, the target had used her abilities to the maximum, although there had been casualties anyway.

However, for his plan, maybe things were better off like this.

– Never mind it…

According to his informers, this Fugo, despite his apparent coldness, actually had another side to him. Whenever he lost his temper he became so violent that no one could stop him. Sogliola certainly didn’t want to risk angering him during such a delicate moment.

– Anyway… – he added, at him, – Buccellati and the others should now be aware of our intentions. I'm certain they're moving by boat to arrive here. We can almost move onto the next phase of the plan, what do you say?

Without caring to reply, Fugo started walking towards the plaza.

– Later, then!

Sogliola threw this last phrase to the boy which walked away giving him the cold shoulder, then muttered through his teeth.

– That brat really gets to me!

CAPITOLO CINQUE

The next day Coniglio was discharged from the hospital.

Her mom and that police detective that resembled Lieutenant Columbo came to pick her up. The young one, who was with him the day before, was not there. She was certain that probably, by seeing him a second time, she’d remember where she already met him, but on the other hand, there was no reason for his presence at the moment.

‘Columbo’ only asked her the home’s address, grumbled some worthless set phrases such as “you must have gotten very tired, miss”, then bid a hasty farewell and vanished. Nothing was said about the hotel’s incident and what happened after.

Speaking of tiredness, I must say that that of last night was worse... thought Coniglio, but when gazing at her mom’s face who, without a word, continued to look at her unable to stop the tears, everything suddenly lost relevance.

While they were waiting for a taxi in front of the hospital’s exit, she saw a group of people dressed in black. A youngster, that gave the impression of being a good guy, a woman still in her prime that desperately cried and, at her side, a man with a pair of moustache, with a robust build, that supported her by the shoulders.

They’re that little girl’s relatives thought Coniglio.

That little girl that I didn’t manage to save. I wonder if the woman is the mother... If that’s the case, then that close to her is the father. Or just another relative. The boy could be the elder brother... The mouth and hair curls are similar to those she had...

At those thoughts she felt darkness cloud her eyes and didn’t even reply to the call of her mother who was able to halt a taxi.

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After last night’s events, Coniglio couldn’t sleep a wink.

Still it seemed to her to have never so greatly craved sleep. She desired, from the bottom of her heart, to sleep and forget everything, but every time her lids grew heavy she got reminded of the little girl’s face and then that of Winona’s.

Doubt and regret tormented her, making painful stabs at the core of her heart.

After finishing sucking away the infection from the old man and the woman who accompanied him, Coniglio rushed with The Cure in the opposite room. But unfortunately, the little girls' conditions were visibly deteriorating.

The Cure had entered first and she had followed it.

– Her first!

According to the girl's indications, the snowy creature brought itself over the face of the little girl who slept in the bed near the corridor. While emanating white light, Coniglio got the impression that The Cure was doing its best in sucking out the disease. Both of its huge ears aimed at the ceiling in a tense manner and the light bluish stones that it had on the tips lit up and dulled to the pace of the little girl's feeble breath.

Watching that scene out of the corner of her eye, Coniglio rushed to the bed of the little girl at the end of the room.

The disease was already in a terminal stage. The white sheets were stained with red blackish flesh and the dark liquids that purged from every part of the body. The black hair was stuck to the forehead, and from her eyes a yellowish fluid relentlessly gushed out.

Maybe for that reason a cloudy veil had fallen upon her eyes, despite that she noticed Coniglio approaching.

– Si... gno... ri... na...

– Everything will be okay! It's okay! You just need to wait a bit! – She had tried to reassure her, grasping the tiny hand the little kid extended in hers. But she knew that by now it was so delicate that the slightest pressure could have crushed it like it was thin terracotta, so she did not squeeze.

– I'm burning... inside... – had gurgled the little girl, puking noisily a big clot of blood. Perhaps she was already starting to lose consciousness.

– Hold on a bit more!

She thought she was repeating the same phrase like an idiot. She took a glance at the nearby bed. The Cure had just finished its work, and turned towards her.

Yes, she'll be saved!

But as soon as she had that though, she felt that strength was leaving the hand she was holding. She hastily turned towards the little girl.

She had her eyes wide open and, on her features, you could read the pain. She could see the muscles of her face had begun to lose tension. The same happened to those of the hand, that she was holding between hers, until she had heard the sharp noise of something that was breaking. She had hurriedly attempted to place the arm on the bed, but it had fallen on the chest. And that was not all. It had sunk deep, in the ribcage's centre, and from the cavity that had formed she saw the usual purple smoke rising.

That smoke carried a scent of death. Coniglio, for the first time in her life, had understood what meant seeing life's light disappearing from someone's eyes.

– There's no place like your own home! – exclaimed the mother while entering, despite that not being quite her own home. Coniglio lead her into the living room and let herself drop on the sofa. She didn't have the will to do anything. She just wanted to be able to sleep. Yet, every single time

she tried, yesterday's events spun in her head like a hurricane. The light that went out from those eyes, those tiny hands from which life slipped away...

– Shall I make you tea? – her mother asked in an attentive way.

Coniglio didn't answer. Her body didn't even have the strength to say "yes, thanks".

She felt a bit guilty. Her mother had left everything to go and get her at the hospital, and now she was worrying over her... Yet, at the moment, she couldn't desire anything besides being alone. It was as if coming back to the days of middle school, when her brother had to leave her and all of her friends had started avoiding her.

And to say that I thought I was accustomed to loneliness she pondered, while the steam that came out of the boiling teapot covered the windows' glasses in a white patina.

– Where is it that you keep the tea? But, if you're tired, wouldn't it be better an herb infusion?

Absent-mindedly following with her eyes the figure of that mother who tried to be cheerful and positive at any cost, Coniglio immersed herself in yesterday's memories.

She didn't want to remember, yet she continued to think about it.

– What are you doing there?!

Coniglio suddenly turned in the direction of that voice behind her back. It was a nurse that held a flashlight.

– But aren't you...? Yes, you're the patient that came yesterday! – she uttered as she turned on the room's neon lights. When she saw the little girl a small yelp had escaped her lips.

– What happened here?!

Coniglio didn't have the willpower to answer. On the other hand, the nurse, without waiting for a reply, had already rushed in the corridor, calling:

– Doctor! Doctor!

The cry had echoed in the silent hospital.

It's all for nothing had thought Coniglio. Then she realised the coldness of such a thought and felt as if suffocating.

She didn't remember well what happened after.

The nurse returned and grabbed her arm to pull her away from the little girl. She had told her: "It's better to go back to your room", or something like that. Otherwise, she would have probably stayed there until who knows when.

She seemed to recall having watched the moon from the corridor's window, and that it had appeared bluish to her. Then, a memory lapse, and she saw herself in her room's bed, desperately sobbing while grasping the sheets.

It was rage. Pure and simple rage. She had cursed her weakness. If only she had noticed sooner... If only she had better known The Cure's powers... If only... But rage in the aftermath had never been useful to anyone.

Coniglio didn't know it yet, but that neon light that the nurse had turned on had prevented the virus from spreading throughout the entire hospital. She could not know that Purple Haze's virus was terribly sensitive to light. She was unable to save the life of a little girl, but thanks to her no other patient was harmed. At least from this point of view she couldn't say that all of her efforts had been pointless. Plus, The Cure's power didn't limit itself to neutralising the virus.

The doctor that had visited the "critical" patients hospitalised in that wing the next day found an unexpected situation. The conditions of those four, except the little girl that died during the night, had improved and made room for predictions about a quick recovery. Something really astonishing.

Even the old man, with a terminal stage cancer, who doctors said only had a few days left, was in nearly perfect health.

– What's happening here?

They decided to wait for the results of further exams before making hypotheses but, that day, all critical care patients of that wing were unequivocally healed and, what's more, all at the same time.

Some superstitious rumours even started among the people in the hospital, as often happens in these cases: "That little girl died and brought back life to all the others" or "she gave her life in exchange for the others". But even if Coniglio had known about this 'miracle', it probably wouldn't have consoled her. She had saved the other four, and not only them, she had actually saved all the patients in the hospital, but the fact that a little girl had died in front of her eyes was impossible to ignore. She saw extinguish a life that she perhaps could have saved. It had been a heavy blow to her. It had truly struck her down.

– It's cruel, too cruel!

It really was too cruel that something so horrible had happened exactly the day after her friend's death. It was more than enough to make her heart want to shut itself off once again.

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What a good scent...

With the fresh scent of mint tickling her nose, Coniglio opened her eyes.

Without noticing she had ended up falling asleep. On the table there was the teapot with the herbal tea that her mother made. It was probably already cold, but the pleasant smell continued to impregnate the whole room.

– What a waste.

Near the teapot was a tiny note her mother had left: "I'll let you sleep, I'm going to the hotel". The room was lit by the moonlight that entered from the window.

She massaged her shoulder, stiff because of having slept on the couch. The shoulder emitted a small crack.

While I'm at it she thought *I might as well drink a nice cup of cold tea!*

– But...?!

She took it to her lips convinced it was mint tea. It was just plain black tea.

Where did it come from, then, that mint scent?

It was then that she became aware that there was someone else in the room. Not any someone. That boy with blond hair, that brought disasters everywhere he showed up, was there, in that room.

Coniglio reflexively froze, gripping the pillow she had slept on.

– Where are you hiding?

At that question, the boy came out of a curtain's shadow. So it was true. It was really him. It was that boy that appeared always like a shadow. First at the hotel, then at the hospital.

– Can I know who the hell are you? *What* are you?!

She now gripped the pillow with both hands to try hiding the fact that she was trembling, but was unable to restrain herself and hurled it at him with all her might. He easily shoved it back with his hand, then he moved one step in Coniglio's direction.

Seen from up close, the boy's face was so beautiful as to be frightening. Lit by the moonlight, his smooth profile had an almost feminine delicateness. The blond hair left to fall over his features without too much care, the mouth small but with well-defined lines, the strangely melancholic eyes, that seemed to peer into her and create the desire to dive into them... He got closer by another step, then turned towards the window. When he was near it, he turned again facing Coniglio.

– Try to look outside.

The boy's voice felt very mature. It reminded her of that of an actor she saw in an old western film... Clint Eastwood? Or was it Giuliano Gemma? It was a memory from long ago, when her brother had taken her to a little arthouse cinema in the outskirts of Roma. Or at least so she remembered.

With her mind distracted by those memories, Coniglio got up, letting herself be led by the words of that boy.

What she saw outside the window went behind the bounds of her imagination.

It was the dark.

The city of Venezia was completely engulfed in darkness. No light filtered from the intimacy of houses, nor that of urban lighting brightened the road to passers-by. Neither were visible the pleasure boats' navigation lights travelling the canals. It was pitch black everywhere. Only the moonlight that kept shining allowed a rough notion of the city in the shadows.

In the little square in front of Coniglio's home there were people on the ground. A couple hugging, an old man that desperately tried getting up with the help of his cane, a young guy that tried to hold himself to the wall with both arms spread as drunkards do...

Between them, right in the centre of the square, she saw that purple figure, that continued to emit sinister vapours from its body. With a swift move the purple figure got near one of the lamp-posts that lit the streets and, with incredible speed, punched it with its fist.

Coniglio saw the pole bend heavily and slowly fall down. She felt a faint sound of broken glass when the lamp touched the ground. A sound so small as to seem of no importance, like the ring of a tiny bell.

– Then it's true that it was you! You're the one who does this terrible thing! – erupted Coniglio at the boy who was at her side.

He didn't reply.

– It was you who killed Winona and that little girl!

The girl's voice got loud enough to almost resemble a cry, but the boy seemed to not care in the slightest about such outburst.

– You're cruel! Too cruel!

She had to resist the temptation to hit him. She clenched her fists with force. They trembled, but not because of fear. It was rage. A rage so strong that almost blinded her.

– Why? Why did you do it?

– I didn't want to meet like this, with you... – was what left the boy's mouth. Unforeseen words of which Coniglio didn't catch the meaning and that also didn't give any answer to what she had asked him.

– Down there, now, there are a lot of people suffering – he resumed, looking right in her eyes, – ...and you have the power to save them.

He got closer to her with yet another step.

– Then? What do you do?

What do I do? Coniglio asked herself in reply, noticing to have gotten suddenly stiff. *What do I do? What else could I do? What do I want to do?*

– ...What do you want me to do...?

– Save them.

The boy's words got to her like a blow on the head. *Save them... Yes, with The Cure I could save the people that are down here, but...*

– But I can't save them all!

– That's not true. You can do it.

– I can't! I'm unable to! – she yelled, nearly crying. But the boy, ignoring those words, almost as a parent scolding their child when throwing a tantrum, only said:

– You will do it.

And the moment after he had already disappeared in the shadow. She looked around the room but there really was no longer anyone there.

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Coniglio trotted down the stairs of the building she lived in. When she opened the main entrance the scent of death came to her in a gust. It was the same scent that had risen, along the violet vapour, from the chest of the little girl that had died in the hospital. The same that had filled the hotel's lobby, that sweetish stench that made your stomach turn. And now it enveloped the whole city. In that street, normally crossed by tourists or people that came back home, often even late at night, a series of laments could now be heard. Obviously there was not even a single light illuminating it.

The moonlight, crossing the purplish smoke screen, shone in an almost surreal way. Checking right by the side of the building's entrance, she noticed that there was an old lady on the ground, with her hand extended as if in an attempt to grab the door handle. She rushed towards her. On her head there was a bluish swelling the size of an apple. The face was striped with bloodied scratches, from which exhaled a strong odour of rotting fruit.

– The Cure! Let's begin with her!

Reacting to the girl's voice, the little stand appeared behind her. It emitted a couple of tiny cries with his nose and immediately put its snout close to the old lady's mouth.

While The Cure was busy with the woman, Coniglio rushed to investigate the vicinities. She pulled a flashlight out of her pocket and moved the light beam in front of the building. *One, two... Yes, here we can still make it in time!* In that moment The Cure finished sucking the illness out of the old lady and hastened toward the young guy leaning on the wall, that had already started to vomit a huge amount of blood. The speed with which the creature sucked increased more and more.

In some way it was growing and it seemed to be getting even stronger.

– When you're done with that boy, the next one is beyond the bench! – incited Coniglio.

Along the narrow street, that stretched from the square up to the canal, there were several people on the ground. That purple monster, from the looks of it, had headed towards the canal, spreading death and pain.

Just how far is that monster planning to go? Will I be able to catch up to it?

The victims, from the little square in front of her house, past the little street that led to the canal, appeared to amass further, closer to Venezia's heart. After being done with the people found in the square, Coniglio and The Cure proceeded along the small road, stopping to check the condition of everyone they found on the ground. It was a disaster. Everywhere one could see shadows of people in agony.

It's like the attic of Hotel Mondo Aria.

What Coniglio got reminded of, as she was advancing towards the canal, was the hotel's attic, where ended up all the objects left unused for years.

Day after day it had become a real warehouse, with the piano with the broken keyboard, the stringless harp, the small rusted over bird cage, the chipped glasses and ceramics. It was packed

with cobwebs, and in the corners accumulated big bundles of white dust, resembling those blowballs that form after dandelions bloom.

Yes, the people on the street were like those balls of dust. Dust accumulated in the corners of an abandoned attic.

For many of them it was already over. For those that still seemed to feebly breathe, Coniglio placed The Cure next to them, praying from her heart, but by then almost everyone had died even before the white creature, drawing its muzzle near, had time to do its job.

She inevitably stepped on the viscous puddles of blood, vomit and various liquids that built up everywhere, slipped, and, while looking at the heaps of corpses which too were everywhere, like dust, got the impression of walking blindfolded beside the edge of a cliff.

At first she kept track of the number of people she had managed to save, but at some point she gave up. She found herself going in circles in the same spot. The scent of death ended up numbing her nerves.

I knew that is was impossible to save everyone! I knew it!

She suddenly felt a surge of hatred toward that blond-haired boy. And, at the same time, she felt livid about having caved in so easily to those appealing but empty words.

Thinking about it rationally, she could have realised that by then the situation had deteriorated to a point where she couldn't have done anything anymore. Yet, it's difficult for those directly involved in such events to realise this. The moment fate involves them, not only do they not have time to see the whole picture of the situation, but also dealing with what they have right in front of them, usually, takes up all of their energy.

In that moment Coniglio found herself in one such situation. She cursed the burst of rage she felt radiating from her, she cursed her perseverance in restraining it, she cursed her hope of being able to do something to help that situation and, lastly, she cursed her ability which had given birth to that hope. Adrift in that storm of emotions, even while she continued to move forward like a somnambulist, she kept putting The Cure close to try and help the people she found on the ground. The white rabbit, on his part, hopped from corpse to corpse with great diligence, as if for him sucking out the harm was source of pleasure. It wiggled its large ears like it was having fun, and moved the tiny mouth, sniffing around, as if it found the stench of death enjoyable.

Like this, even if little by little, The Cure's body could be seen growing.

After wandering for a long time in that Venezia wrapped in darkness, Coniglio finally caught sight of a small light. It was beyond the Rialto bridge, past the Canal Grande. Something was burning in the back of an alley that led to an old church. They were tall red flames, that, at times, seemed to lap at the darkness like snake tongues.

– The Cure!

She involuntarily called it out loud. Those flames did not bode any good. If she had the cool to think about it for a moment, it would have been impossible for her not to realise it, yet, in that moment, with the prospect of escaping the darkness, Coniglio felt happy to no end.

If there's a fire, it's possible for there to also be firefighters. Maybe I will find someone that's still alive!

She began running without even noticing. She just wanted to quickly exit that alley shrouded in a blackness rendered even deeper by contrast with the fire's brightness. What burned with such intensity at the end of that alley was the building that housed an old hotel.

From the fury of the flames it was evident the fire was already untameable at that point. Part of the walls and columns, blackened, had bent, succumbing to the violence of the fire, and a section of the roof had already collapsed. The scorching heat of the flames came brought by the wind. Paying attention, around the entry, one could see the corpses of those that didn't make it out in time, scattered and blackened by the blaze as mere pieces of coal.

It's too hot thought Coniglio. *Too hot.*

In spite of a fire of significant range like that, there was no one on the streets. No fireboat signalled its arrival with the sound of sirens, no photojournalist came running to further light the scene with his dazzling flashes. There weren't even the usual stupid onlookers that did nothing but take everything for a show and hinder the firemen's work.

There really wasn't anybody. Only a house in flames.

Too many dead. Too many dead that maybe she could have saved, too many dead that she didn't arrive in time to save.

She remained there, watching with an air of indifference the scorching dance with which that fire, almost sardonic, spread in front of her eyes.

Between the flames she saw a dark shadow move. *Maybe it's a mirage caused by the heat of the fire* she thought, straining her eyes. That shadow danced the same heated dance as the fire. Maybe in a desperate attempt to extinguish the flames, it moved arms, legs, the whole body, clashing roughly against the walls. After a bit the flames had completely enveloped the shadow, which vanished behind a pile of crumbled ruins.

What a shame... They must be dead...

And, suddenly, she was aware that tears had continued to pour from her eyes without even knowing it.

In that city of darkness in which nobody could be seen around, echoed the toll of a church bell.

As if announcing the departure for the last journey of all those who died.

Or at least, so it seemed to Coniglio.

CAPITOLO SEI

Venezia, the city on water. Little gondolas highlighting the city's antique atmosphere. On those rowing boats, lovers always whispering sweet nothings to each other. Churches and squares that time left unaltered, almost identical to how they were built, and splendid palaces, previously used to house various nations' embassies, seem to be challenging themselves in a competition of grandeur and beauty.

Yet that was just one of the many faces of Venezia.

For example, the sea water that often invades Piazza San Marco, the huge one in front of its namesake cathedral, can give us an idea about the type of city Venezia is. The locals call it 'acqua alta', and it's a rather common phenomenon that can be observed every year from October to April, when the cold wind from the Adriatico sea blows. The floods in Venezia are caused by the ebb of sea water through three sluice gates that moderate the entry of water in the immense lagoon surrounding the city. To tell the truth, it's not that it's possible to pinpoint a proper and definite cause to this phenomenon. The changes of the tide and the atmospheric pressure, the wind currents and other natural events accumulate to become a multiple cause for the covering of several parts of the city by water, especially the ones where the ground has suffered a deep depression such as the zone of Piazza San Marco, where water completely floods the street and, in the worst cases, pedestrians aren't even allowed to pass. Obviously the sluices are equipped with a powerful system of openings to regulate and control the flow of the waters. That day, however, an exceptional tide had occurred, such to render completely useless the system, and in Venezia the *acqua alta* had reached levels never seen before.

– First the black-out, then the acqua alta. What a shitty situation! – grumbled Mista from the driver's seat in the motorboat.

It was already past 10 pm. They were slowly travelling the Canal Grande towards south, from where, normally, one could have enjoyed the wonderful sight of the city illuminated for the tourists. Apparently, the danger of the mines was over, but on the path of Buccellati and his companions there was now that natural one of the dark caused by the black-out, added to the change of the panorama because of the acqua alta. A moment of distraction would have been sufficient to mistakenly end up going against a stone wall or a sidewalk, and end up definitively stranded.

– I can't even see a reference point!

Because of the dark, all the buildings had become indistinct black shadows and the field of view was frightfully near zero. The only guidance they could count on was the radar of Narancia's Aerosmith combined with Mista's intuition.

– It's almost like there's no one in the city!

Narancia's radar gave off almost no signal. Only few small red dots that were blinking, and among them some that appeared to be on the verge of switching off at any moment. The rest was complete

silence, as the one of the darkness that surrounded them at the moment. No, a big bright dot was there. It was near Piazza San Marco, the place they were trying to reach.

– ...Silence! – exclaimed Abbacchio without taking off his eyes from the black shiny surface of the water.

– This bell... What could it mean... – Trish whispered, scared, as if voicing the unspoken question of Abbacchio.

It was a sound that had started making itself heard just prior, almost indistinct. It seemed to be coming from the big campanile of San Marco. As proof of this, as their boat got closer, it became louder, and echoed with such force it felt like it was ringing directly in the brain.

– It surely must be the people from the organisation – commented Giorno, shooting a look in Buccellati's direction.

Buccellati didn't say anything and, standing at Mista's side, continued to intensively watch the darkness in front of them. It was Mista that answered instead of him:

– The only certain thing is that there must be a trap ahead.

It happened in that exact instant.

– Aaah!

With a yell, Narancia stumbled bringing a hand to his shoulder. Risking falling off, he was quick to hold on the boat's edge, so much that, as a consequence, it started to roll violently. It was then that a tiny light blue mass exited from his shoulder and, at an incredible speed, bolted towards the square.

– What was that?!

– Is everything alright? – asked Mista from the driver's seat, turning to face Narancia who, while earlier had been seated at his right, was now fallen at Abbacchio's feet, behind him.

– Everything's... Alright...

– From where the hell did they shoot you?!

Abbacchio quickly glanced around, but he saw no trace of the enemy. On the other hand, they were right in the middle of the canal. It was impossible for someone to be able to get closer to the boat without them noticing.

– Hang in there, Narancia! – said Giorno while placing a hand on the wounded shoulder of Narancia.

Giorno's stand, Gold Experience, could heal wounds. Rather, to be precise, it was not exactly a healing power. It had the ability to give life to inanimate objects. It could transform a brick into a frog, a spoon into a butterfly, a shard of iron into a bat. Thanks to this ability it was capable of transforming an object into a part of the human body.

Squeezing the hand his friend had on his shoulder, Narancia cried desperately:

– Giorno, I don't see it anymore!

– What's that you don't see?

– My stand! Aerosmith is not here anymore!

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The man that they called 'Rigatoni' had waited for them from his lookout.

He was on the big campanile, the highest place in Venezia. Near the bell that continued to produce that deafening noise, he had patiently awaited the arrival of his target.

He had rough features and unkempt beard. His hair had already started to turn white, so much that strands of streaked hair appeared here and there, but from the slits of his black clothes that he was wearing, one could glimpse a lean and well-trained body.

Rigatoni was one of the hitmen of the organisation. One of the best, one that got entrusted only really important tasks. Even inside the organisation few were the people aware of his existence, known only to a limited number of capi. The lowest rungs on the hierarchical scale got to know of him only when it was their turn to die.

The reason why the existence of this killer had been kept strictly secret was simple. Rigatoni was a 'stand-killer', a hitman that only targeted stand users. Needless to say that he was one as well. They say that the ones belonging to this organisation, that made its influence felt on all Italian territory, were about a few tens of thousands. Yet, among them, stand users were just a small number. Plus, the majority of them filled the role of 'capo', and were the nerve centre of the whole organisation.

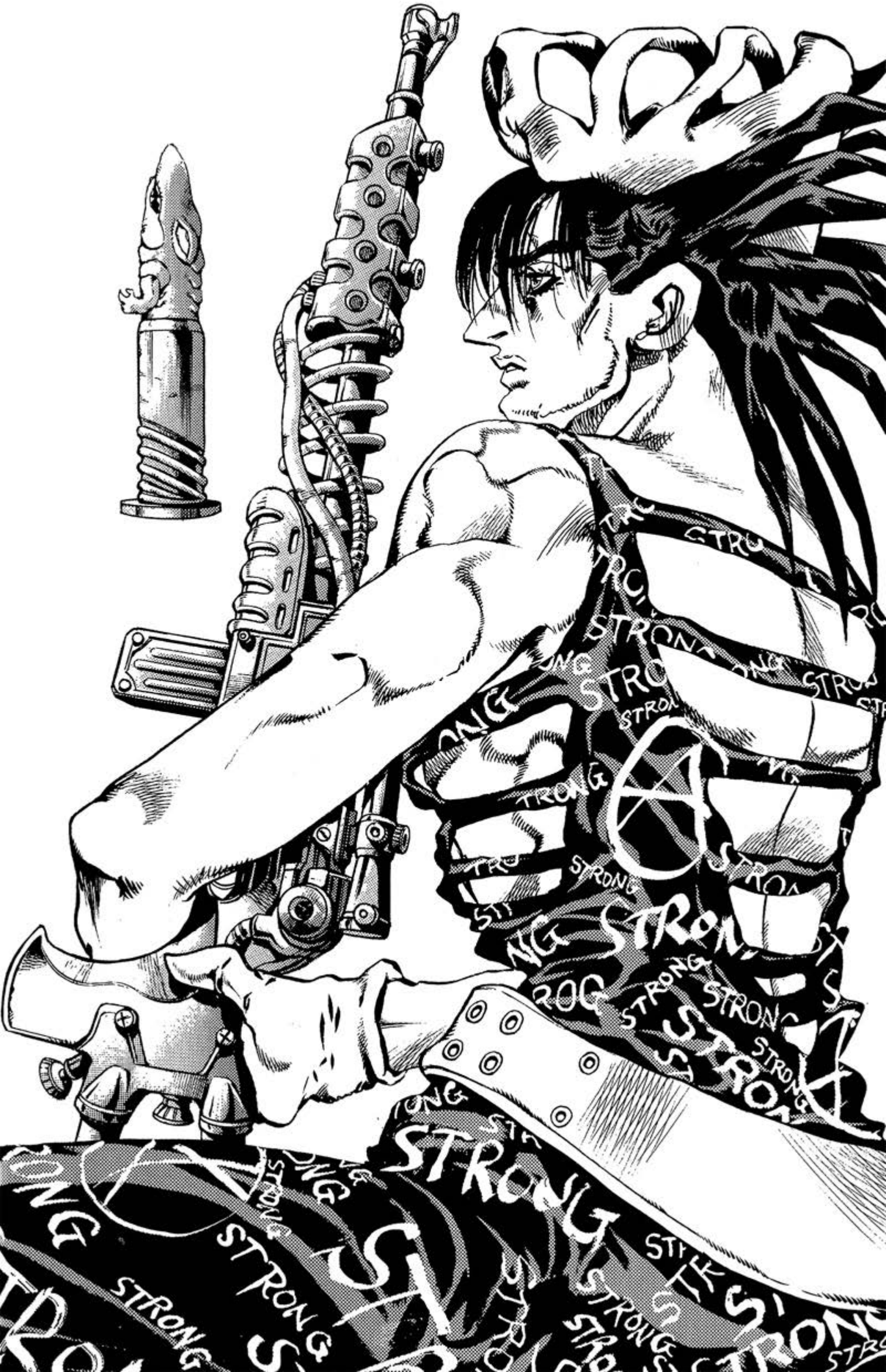
"There's a stand user to eliminate".

When this critical situation occurred, usually it meant that in the heart of the organisation a civil war had broken out. The peripheral struggles for power, the conspiracies, the vendettas: these were the situations in which he was called in. Where Rigatoni passed through, all that was left behind him was a pile of corpses. Many capi resorted to him as a last resource. Because of this his existence had to remain secret as much as possible.

His strong point consisted especially in the fact that he was a formidable shooter. It was said, who knows why, that he was able to hit the eye of a seagull while it was flying far over the open sea. Obviously it was just a legend. Rigatoni never shot a seagull and much less had the intention of doing so. This because his habitual targets were only stand users.

Obviously there was a reason for this. His power supported itself by assimilating energy from his opponents' stands.

The bullets shot by Rigatoni were coupled with a blue stand, called Public Image Limited. Thanks to the stand he was able to hit the enemy's body with exceptional precision. Moreover, the speed of the bullet was four times the normal. Even if eventual obstacles stood between him and his objective, the bullet was able to pierce through and hit the mark. The range was of 150 metres. His extraordinary ability was such to have even birthed the tale of the killing of a victim hit after the projectile had penetrated a building from side to side.


STRONG

His stand had only one flaw. The moment in which the bullet hit the target, entering the body of the enemy, it consumed all of its power. The incredible precision of the shot originated from the fact that in that action the stand exhausted all of its energy. And when a stand spends all of its power it vanishes into the ether, but that also means the death of its owner.

Yet Rigatoni was still alive and well. When Public Image Limited entered the body of the target, it assimilated from their stand all the energy it had to use in the act. If the intention was that of killing the adversary, it would have killed them even at the cost of consuming all of its power. If, instead, the intention was only to wound, he just needed to shoot by limiting the use of energy. Obviously this entailed, on his part, a precise evaluation relative to stamina's recovery from the targeted stand. In addition to this, with the enemy temporarily deprived of their stand, it made them practically defenceless for a certain amount of time.

This was the reason why he targeted only stand users. In any case, the moment the enemy got in the range of the telescopic gunsight he had set on his favourite rifle, you could be sure he'd hit them.

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A bit of spice now and then is vital for an exciting life. So that, even now some years after he had retired into private life, there he was again, suddenly, letting himself be borrowed to the frontline. And this time he had been called back by those stingy thugs who ran Venezia.

I really can't stomach that old asshole Sogliola, but... but I must admit that this time's job isn't bad at all... Besides, like this I'll see the boy again...

Despite the boat's rolling, Giorno was able to provide first temporary aid to Narancia, then, turned to Mista, he asked:

– Remaining here is too dangerous. Isn't there a place where it's possible to dock?

– Easy to say, but in these conditions... – answered Mista, after having had a quick look around. Because of the acqua alta it wasn't possible to even understand where the canal ended and the shore started. Adding to that the black-out, it really wasn't easy to decide how to move. While thinking about what to do, Mista heard a sharp hiss darting right next to his ear.

– Aah!

Abbacchio dropped to his knees on the bottom of the boat, gripping his abdomen with his hands.

– Not again!

– But from where are they shooting?! – Giorno and Mista shouted at the same time.

– Hurry, take cover! Trish! Giorno! In here! – exclaimed Buccellati as he extended an arm towards the bottom of the boat. An unnaturally large zip had appeared, and unzipping it, Buccellati opened a gash from where, strangely, water didn't enter. Inside that gash there was, instead, a completely dark space. Sticky Fingers, Buccellati's stand, had the power to apply zips on living beings or

objects to his liking. In the places hit by his fists, zips suddenly appeared which, once open, allowed him to come and go through walls, or even underground. It was a stand with short range, but it could be very versatile. At first sight it could seem a not very useful power, but Buccellati had learnt with time how to use it with extreme originality. One time he neutralised an enemy attack by changing the position of organs and parts of his body (that continued to function normally despite being moved from their normal places) thanks to the interchangeability of his zips. Other times, as an alternative, he had created completely unexpected escape routes, leaving the enemy wondering where he had gone. In conclusion, his range of use could be really ample. Additionally, regarding destructive force and speed, it was a stand among the most dangerous out there.

– You too, Mista!

After having shoved Trish and Giorno inside of his zip, Buccellati urged Mista, who was still in the boat's driving spot, to do the same.

– No, wait, Buccellati...

– What?!

– I don't think that these kinds of little tricks will work with the enemy we're facing – replied Mista, with his gaze fixed on the darkness that expanded in front of him.

– I would have never imagined to meet you again in a place like this! – he then yelled, increasing the speed of the motorboat in the direction of the big campanile.

– And we'll make it clear once and for all who's the best... My Sex Pistols or your Public Image Limited!

When Mista had entered the world of organized crime, he was still a little boy that barely distinguished his right hand from his left. His daily life was spent between the execution of small vendettas and inner conflicts. Thanks to a powerful stand such as Sex Pistols, gradually, he had made a name for himself in the organisation, but all the tasks he was entrusted where, more or less, on the same tone.

In that period he happened to often complain with his comrades.

"It's nothing. Anyone could do it in my place!"

It was then that Mista had met Rigatoni.

Their task was to assassinate the one that was considered the Boss's right hand, to soften the opposition. The problem consisted in the fact that the man was probably a stand user. Mista had already eliminated various small fry and some capi, and was showing a really outstanding capacity for growth, but that would have been his first time facing a stand user.

It's no big deal, everything will go alright! he had thought at the start.

Yet, as a first experience, he couldn't help but worry a bit.

Rigatoni, the killer with the infallible hand that targeted only stand users, was in charge of that operation. Usually he wasn't the type to act in a group, but that time, in case the target wasn't a

stand user, he would withdraw from the job and have someone else take his place. For this role Mista had been called.

The target, just as the other big shots had imagined, really turned out to be a stand user. Mista didn't much love remembering what happened that day. It should be enough to say that with that job, for the first time since he was in the organisation, he had felt the bitter taste of humiliation. Using a single shot Rigatoni had gotten him out of trouble.

He thought that he would probably never forget that tiny light blue shape that had swept past in front of him.

He had heard the sound of the enemy's body collapsing, after which, slumped to the ground as he was, he saw a pair of legs in front of him. The left one limped lightly.

– Is everything ok? – had asked Rigatoni, helping him stand up again and lean against a wall. Mista, with a deep breath, had replied:

– Yeah, everything's alright.

– Good.

Those were the only words that they had exchanged. Then Rigatoni had walked in the enemy's direction.

He's going to ascertain he's dead for real had thought Mista. But he was wrong. Closer to his enemy's body, he heard him say:

– Old friend, this time you had bad luck. Don't worry, though. Soon it'll be my turn. Wait for me, and then we'll drink a toast together.

In a state of sluggish consciousness, Mista was sure he had heard him say so.

From then on, for a certain period, Mista and Rigatoni had continued to work together. He didn't remember well how the affair started.

As for their personality they were complete opposites. Every little thing made for an excellent pretext to generate a violent argument, so much that trading punches had become routine, after some time. Yet the pair didn't break up.

But one day their weird alliance split up unexpectedly.

They had gotten the order to kill a woman, maybe a stand user.

This time I won't fail for sure had thought Mista, taking the mission lightly.

And it was exactly that kind of thinking that had led him to commit a mistake.

In short, the woman was able to escape. Despite being severely wounded, she completely vanished from their sight. Not to mention that the woman resulted in not being a stand user, and because of that the finishing blow should have been dealt by Mista.

If the mission had completely failed, the fault was all his.

When Mista came back to the base, Rigatoni had no kind words to spare. In his opinion, it didn't exist any difference between a corpse and a hitman unable to accomplish the task entrusted to him. Rigatoni had pedantically pointed out to him the fundamental importance of the target's elimination. Public Image Limited was a stand that seemed to have been made exactly for that goal. Mista's opinion in regards to that was different.

The argument that had broken out that time was furious, but the whole thing appeared to have ended there. Instead, when Mista woke up the next morning, his partner was gone.

I knew it had thought Mista.

Yet, thinking back to it now, he realized he had been mistaken. Betraying a partner's trust: that was a thing that absolutely shouldn't be done. Traitors, sooner or later, find themselves paying a very high price.

– The time to settle the score has come, it seems.

The motorboat arrived at Piazza San Marco. There was little less than a meter of water. The bottom of the boat scraped more and more frequently on the square's stone paving, and every time it did the boat shook violently.

Rigatoni surely was on the campanile's tower. For the stakeout, assassins always choose places that, not only are ideal for their purpose, but are also difficult for the enemy to attack. Maybe it was just a feeling, but Mista was certain that Rigatoni was right up there. At least, if he had been in his place, he would have done so.

I'm sure the next shot is at me.

Of this too, Mista was certain.

Before that happened, he had to find a way to have Rigatoni within shooting range of Sex Pistols. Trying to control the boat that continued to scrape on the bottom, he moved in the direction of the campanile.

Maybe, since it's him, he'll give me time to catch up. He likes direct confrontation, he wants to look the enemy in the eyes.

Rigatoni was observing the boat that headed towards the campanile in a straight line. Driving it, was the enemy that he had been awaiting most eagerly, Mista. He would think about the others later. He had decided that the first to be killed should be the one that he held close to his heart, his dear pupil. That was the reason for not killing his two mates.

He fixed the glove on his right hand again. Just a few more seconds and he would be in range of Sex Pistols. In that moment the challenge would have begun. Even Mista should have understood that by now.

– Sex Pistols will never make it against me. I'll teach you a good lesson – said Rigatoni while positioning his loved rifle on his right arm.

– C’mon, boys!

The little golden stands answered in unison to Mista’s signal.

– Hurrah!

– Yaaa-ho!

– Here we go!

Hearing their voices, Mista couldn’t hold back a smile. A sharp shot echoed through the square. The first to fire was Mista.

Yet he was still too far for the bullets to reach up to the campanile, where the enemy was hiding. He shot a second time, then again a third. His aim was to push even further the first bullet to make it reach the target.

The first bullet was caught mid-flight by No. 1. The next two bullets were intercepted respectively by No. 2, No. 3, No. 5 and No. 6, which provided them with a higher flight speed in order to hit the bullet already in mid-air. Only the precision and speed of Sex Pistols allowed for such a move.

– So naïve! – commented Rigatoni while moving his head a few millimetres to the side in order to dodge the bullet. But he didn’t manage to do so completely and felt the pain of being scratched on a cheek.

– Looks like you’ve improved a lot – said again, bringing the sight of his rifle to search for Mista’s head.

– A bit more... a bit more...

– Just as I thought! – exclaimed Mista, aiming his gun again, this time upwards, and shooting three shots. A gesture like that, seen by common bystanders, could have been seen as an act of surrendering. Obviously it was the total opposite. Sex Pistols, scattered in mid-air and holding on to the first bullets, intercepted and began to pass each other the bullets of these three new shots, leading them along an impossible zig-zag trajectory. Thanks to this act, it was nearly impossible for the enemy to tell from where the shots could come from.

The three bullets were aimed simultaneously, but from different directions, at the man stationed on the campanile.

– Interesting tactic. A shame that you’re a bit too far away.

Rigatoni, however, seemed able to tell the trajectories of every bullet.

The three shots ended up, indeed, one after the other against the wall, not even grazing him. Rigatoni continued to look through his gunsight while paying no mind to the shards of stone that rained on him.

– Darn it!

– We missed him by a hair!

Sex Pistols loudly expressed their disappointment.

At this point Mista was so close that Rigatoni could see his face even with a naked eye. It was then that, suddenly, the boy turned to one side. In Rigatoni's gunsight Mista's temple was completely in focus.

– Rock is dead, but pop will live forever. Addio, Mista.[7]

The finger that Rigatoni was resting on the trigger moved slightly.

Lacerating the darkness, a huge blue flame aimed towards the boat, at Mista.

– Mista! It's coming! – yelled Giorno who, suddenly, appeared at his side.

– Good! – answered Mista, shooting in the direction of the light the bullet he had just inserted in the cylinder. The two bullets were going against each other. But just when they were about to collide, the inconceivable happened: the one shot by Mista transformed into a huge bat.

Rigatoni couldn't hold back a whispered cry of surprise. He would have never expected what he had just seen in the gunsight.

But for Public Image Limited's power, that wasn't enough of a reason to falter. The projectile shot by Rigatoni had a destructive power multiple times higher than that of any bullet. In effect, it went through the body of the bat and continued in its trajectory.

Yet, in that instant, the duel's outcome had already been decided.

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Mista's plan was, in fact, very simple: getting close enough to be in range and waiting for the other to shoot. For that reason he had shot all of his six bullets, giving Rigatoni an appetizing opportunity to hit him. His first two attacks had only been for that purpose. They were a trap to make the enemy shoot.

The six shots exhausted, Mista would have load his gun again. The small moment necessary for the operation would have given Rigatoni a fantastic opportunity, and someone like him wouldn't waste it.

Mista specifically counted on this. He *needed* the other to shoot. When it came to prowess, he knew Rigatoni was superior to him. His possibility of defeating him would have normally been infinitely close to zero. He had no choice but to outsmart him.

It was necessary to ensure that Rigatoni's shot ended up hitting Rigatoni himself.

And that was made possible thanks to Gold Experience, Giorno's stand.

While he lured Rigatoni's attention to himself, Mista had loaded into the gun the bullet he had previously given Giorno. The same bullet that Gold Experience's ability had prepared so that it

[7] T.N.: This is a call back to how Public Image Limited was founded by the singer of Sex Pistols; and while the former was 'punk-pop' the latter was 'punk-rock'. Rawest line in the book? Possibly.

would transform into a bat during its trajectory. He simply had to shoot it against the one led by Public Image Limited.

Gold Experience's power could not only transform inanimate objects into living beings. Anyone who wounded such creatures in any way suffered, as a consequence, all damage inflicted.

The bullet which killed the bat had, in the same exact instant, provoked a deadly hole in Rigatoni's heart.

The man was shocked at the unexpected blow he had felt in his chest.

He didn't see the bullet. Yet, that bat... That bat must have surely played a role in this. Rigatoni couldn't quite explain to himself what had happened, but he understood perfectly that the one who had arranged everything was, without a shadow of a doubt, Mista, that guy that always stank of sweat like an animal.

– He's really grown up – he muttered to himself, feeling his strength abandon him. The rifle slipped from his hand and dropped to the ground with a sharp metallic sound. His legs could no longer sustain him and the knees gave out. Then, the man who they called Rigatoni slowly collapsed to the floor on his back, his eyes turned skywards.

I've lived long. After all, I don't mind ending like this was his last thought.

The bullet shot by Rigatoni's rifle, with Public Image Limited's control lost, deviated sharply from its course. Unfortunately, however, its speed wasn't dampened, so much so that it ended hitting Mista's shoulder.

Mista was expecting that. The blood that sprayed from his wound even reached his face.

– Uhh! – Mista couldn't stifle back a groan.

– Hold on, Mista!

Giorno supported his companion who, due to the blow, was about to fall on the bottom of the boat. Despite having lost much of its power, Rigatoni's shot had still preserved a surprising amount of destructive power. If someone without Mista's mettle had been hit, they probably wouldn't have handled it as well.

He thought that if that shot had reached his head, it would have no doubt destroyed over half his brain. Gathering his remaining strength, Mista turned off the boat's engine. Because of the inertia the boat arrived at the entrance of the Basilica di San Marco and, slowly, stopped. The tip lightly hit against a column and the bottom of the boat grated on the church entrance's steps.

At that point, the zip on the bottom of the boat opened noisily, letting Trish and Buccellati out. At the sight of Mista's shoulder, Trish let out a yelp.

– You're gravely injured!

– Whatever, it's no big deal... for such a little hole... – replied the boy with a grimace. – Giorno will fix me up in a bit.

– Do you take me for your personal doctor? – joked Giorno with a smile.

– And those two over there? – asked Mista, gripping his shoulder and turning towards Narancia and Abbacchio, who were lying on the bottom of the boat.

– They're unconscious, but they're okay. Look up.

At the place indicated by Buccellati, Narancia's Aerosmith gave a metallic shine under the moon rays. Evidently, with Rigatoni's death, the stand power which Public Image Limited had stolen from the boy had been retrieved.

– Thank goodness... – whispered Trish with a huge sigh of relief.

– It's still not over. The decisive moment is only about to start! – commented Giorno.

– Indeed... – echoed Buccellati.

Giorno and Buccellati disembarked at the basilica's entrance. The door was wide open, as if someone was expecting them.

More than a place of worship, to them it appeared like crossing the gigantic portal that leads to hell.

CAPITOLO SETTE

Hexagons, triangles, squares. The geometric shapes into which are cut the stones of the basilica's are incredibly diverse. It would suffice only that multicolour mosaic to satisfy the eyes of the tourists who entered there. Instead, even the walls are all covered with spectacular mosaics. There's the one that portrays the Doge Vitale Falier with the relics of San Marco, the seduction of Erode by the beautiful Salomè, the triumphant entry of Christ in Jerusalem... Stories from various periods and depicted in various epochs but every of them majestic and splendid.

And if you run your gaze high above, along the columns describing ample arches towards the ceiling, it's then that beyond your eyes opens the cupola, with the representation of the assumption of Christ in Heaven.

There are four angels that shine in the darkness. Between them Christ, with open arms, who rises upwards. At his feet the Virgin with the twelve apostles. The faint moonlight that filtered through the small skylight breathed life into this spectacle of the grandiose panorama.

The massive cathedral of San Marco, the pride of Venezia.

In that moment it was completely empty.

There were none of the tourists, none of the devoted who, usually, were never lacking.

In their place was a shadow, a shadow so big as to veil the gold of the assumption of Christ that shone in the darkness. It was a gigantic white creature from which emanated a strange stench. Both his anterior paws were stretched out forward, and had three long claws each. Six in total, amid which one could catch a glimpse of the snout. From the mouth, which widened open like a broad cut through the snout, alongside a thick yellowish saliva that dripped non-stop onto the ground, came a stench enough to cause retching from nausea, exhaled in noisy puffs that resembled those of a piston. The ears, already originally big, where before they were pink now had assumed a dirty orange hue and, together with the colossal tail stretched backwards and stiff, vibrated harshly.

The little gems that it had on the forehead and the back of the front paws shone in a blood red colour, so much that the light they released, blood red as well, spread around an almost evil atmosphere.

– You've arrived just in time, Fugo – said the short man, wrapped up in his rubber suit, to the boy with blond hair.

The boy, without even bothering to answer him, continued to watch the huge monster that stood before him.

– Now all we can do is wait for the enemy's arrival.

The man's voice came faint and distorted, since he had his face also almost entirely covered by the rubber.

– I think it's best not to cry victory until the end, Sogliola.

– Is that so? You think those guys even have a chance of beating this monster?

– Even the hitman you called to eliminate them, that Rigatoni, in the end was unable to defeat Buccellati's team.

At those words, the man in the rubber suit pulled a face in annoyance.

– I didn't certainly think he'd be able to eliminate Buccellati and his gang all alone! After all, he managed to incapacitate three out of five of them. I think it's a good result. After all, isn't it often said that victory is a matter of good fortune?

– Fortune? It's obvious that you're a gambler, sir.

At Fugo's irreverent words, the man started to get nervous.

– I only play *to win!*

– Bah...

At that line, Fugo couldn't hold back. For the first time he addressed the man that was to his side by looking him straight in the face.

– You, sir... are you really convinced you won't lose?

The man in the rubber suit was the orchestrator of everything that had happened until that moment, Sogliola Lopez in person. He was covered from the tip of his hair to the tips of his toenails in a rubber outfit, tight and elastic, which reminded that of a scuba diver underwater, or some strange fetishistic outfit.

But Sogliola wasn't dressed that way as a joke, and the Carnevale was still far. That rubber outfit was indispensable to allow staying in that place at that moment.

Out of the huge monster that had placed itself in the centre of San Marco's cathedral, what in its entirety stood out the most was, more than anything, the eyes. One was red as if suffering a haemorrhage, the other was of a golden yellow from which shone an opaque light. In the middle of its pupils burnt a purple coloured flame. Those eyes which were so full of evil that just looking directly into them would cause dizziness stared vacantly, without looking at anything in particular.

That monster was The Cure.

That stand that used to roll placidly on Coniglio's lap had escaped her control and had completely gone mad.

The power of The Cure was to absorb the evil and the suffering of men. But all the pain it absorbed had to end up somewhere. And it wasn't plausible that it dispersed in the air to end up in the bright blue sky.

The pain and suffering it absorbed accumulated in its inside.

Like the mud that settles in the bottom of a pond, in it had developed a multilayered vortex of suffering. Normally, the accumulation would have been released during Coniglio's everyday life. Instead, because of the incident, The Cure had gotten enlarged from the excess of pain it had absorbed, a quantity so high to surpass what it could tolerate.

After all, it meant that Coniglio's suffering had also gotten bigger and overburdening. Because of all those dead that she had found herself in front of, her nerves had been worn out past the limit and in the end, in front of that burning house, the thread had been broken.

In that moment the only thing Coniglio had desired was to be relieved of the suffering.

All the pain that had been inflated like one of those amusement parks balloons had suddenly flown away, spreading through all of Venezia.

And her stand, The Cure, had continued to get bigger. It had walked triumphantly all around Venezia spreading Purple Haze's virus.

The concentration of the virus was even higher than that initially spread by Fugo's stand. After the passage of The Cure, people continued to feel ill and die amid atrocious laments. The families that had been interrupted in their routine by the sudden lack of light, the numerous tourists that had gathered in that place to enjoy their short holiday...

Without Coniglio's control, The Cure had continued to advance tirelessly, letting itself to be guided by instinct and, while roaming, it continued to spread that lethal virus. On its large back it brought along the girl, unconscious.

The Cure didn't have a precise objective, while it roamed the city's streets as a plague spreader. It had been the sound of the bell to guide him, by leveraging on its instinct.

Obviously that sound was also a means to have Buccellati and his companions get closer and fall into the trap.

The plan had been put into action according to Sogliola's detailed calculations and the instructions he had given.

Without directly getting his hands dirty, he had brought it onwards slowly but steadily, as if slowly executing the enemy with a silk cord around the neck. Soft at first, and deadly afterwards. You could even say it was a plan befitting of that Sogliola who with his schemes had been able to gain control of all of Venezia.

He had the special rubber outfit that he was wearing be made to allow being in that moment inside the cathedral without risking being infected with Purple Haze's virus. To tell the truth, it wasn't in his character nor in his habits to be on the frontline wearing something so cumbersome and uncomfortable as that. He would have preferred to listen afterwards to the report from his men, waiting leisurely in his villa by the sea, sat with a good glass of wine in hand.

But this time the enemy was too strong. Strong enough to have defeated Rigatoni, the legendary stand killer. He had done well by being there in person. It wouldn't have been bad to enjoy their end.

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Buccellati and Giorno transferred Narancia and Abbacchio, still semiconscious, into the Turtle. Even Mista, aching from the hit received during the duel against Public Image Limited, made his

entrance, and Trish followed him. Then Buccellati and Giorno entered the basilica, which appeared silent and deserted.

The silence was such that one could have heard a pin fall to the ground. Looking around with circumspection, they advanced slowly in that silence.

After a while they found themselves in front of a huge door that gave access to a chapel. The two companions placed their hands on the door and exchanged a knowing look.

– One, two... three!

When they threw open the door at three, what they saw was a show too horrific to seem real. People over people. Heaps of corpses amassed over each other. Bodies with blackish faces, arms and legs bent in unnatural directions, scattered here and there to the sides of the passage. Were they tourists? Or believers? The floor was covered by a black liquid as viscous as tar, and there wasn't any spot where to place your feet without risking dipping them in it.

From that mountain of bodies rose a lament that resounded in the chapel like a sick and deformed litany in an unknown language.

They were the sobs, the screams, the laments of the people piled up on top of each other.

– But what...?

Buccellati and Giorno looked at each other.

– Purple Haze's power is truly terrifying! – said Giorno.

Buccellati shook his head.

– Indeed it seems Purple Haze's virus, but...

He had no way to finish his sentence.

A monstrous cry echoed around them, followed by the dull sound of heavy steps approaching. What they saw, raising their eyes, was an enormous white monster that stood out against the golden light of the church.

– Here, finally our guests for tonight have arrived! – exclaimed Sogliola with a sneer. To Fugo, who observed at his side, that sneer appeared only as a distortion of his features under the rubber outfit.

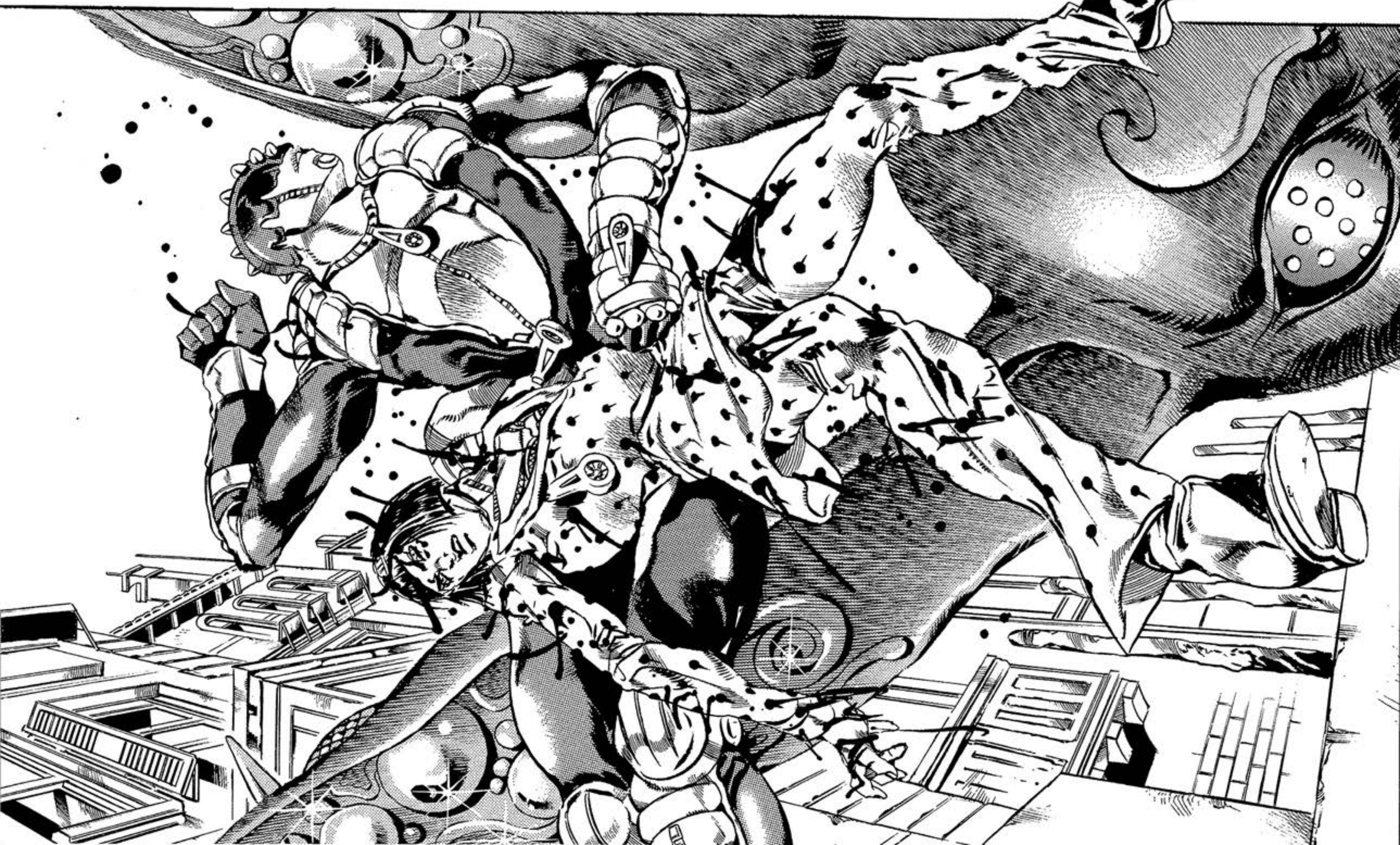
– Let's see how they'll manage now.

– What... What the hell...?!

Buccellati didn't have the time to open his mouth before the monster disappeared. The next instant the boy was flying away with force against a lateral wall.

– It's extremely fast! – exclaimed Giorno, surprised. That huge monster surpassed a 20 meter distance in a single instant and struck down Buccellati.

Buccellati was about to crash against one of the columns that supported the vault when, desperately trying to regain control of his flying body, he called:



– Sticky Fingers!

A moment just before the impact, his stand bolted towards the column and applied a zipper that opened letting him pass through the stone. He avoided crashing against it, but he couldn't avoid the impact with the floor.

As if mocking him, The Cure hurled towards him again. There were claw scratches coming relentlessly from every angle. Buccellati attempted avoiding them by rolling over right and left. Every time that the claws hit the floor, stone shards from the mosaic sprang out into the air, hitting him in his face and littering it with small wounds.

The boy continued to dodge those attacks with all of his strength but the virus that The Cure's body kept spreading incessantly had made contact with him and began to make its effects felt.

The Cure's claws were able to graze him in the abdomen.

Buccellati felt the tips of his fingers go numb and, immediately after, a shadow clouding his eyes. He also felt the scorching heat of his own breath.

That tenacious attack that didn't even give him the time to take a breath, had backed him into a corner in the end.

In the meantime, Giorno had noticed that small shadow on the monster's back.

What could it be? he asked himself, observing better that sort of stain that resembled a human shape.

While The Cure attacked Buccellati, an abrupt movement raised her arms, and eventually the tiny shadow slipped down.

– It's a person! A girl!

Giorno rushed in her help. The girl was still unconscious but, except for the bump that she got by falling, she didn't seem to have suffered any other damage.

– Hey! Wake up! – exclaimed Giorno tapping her two, three times on the cheek.

The hair, damp with sweat, moved. Then the girl suddenly opened her eyes and sat up.

– ...Where am I? – she asked herself, and widened her eyes at the sight of the boy in front of her.

– Everything's alright. You fainted – Giorno gently replied.

– But who are...?

The girl didn't have the time to finish her question before a huge white shadow darted to her side.

The Cure's paw hit Giorno's side and brought him upwards.

– Aaaaahh!

His body was squeezed in a very strong hold.

– No! Stop it! – cried Coniglio.

The creature completely disregarded her and the gigantic paw continued with its attack.

The old man laughed inside his rubber coveralls. All of his body was shaking as if he had convulsions, such was his delight.

– There, did you see?

Sogliola and Fugo were on a balcony overhanging the second floor of the cathedral. From that position one could perfectly see the central nave and could enjoy in complete safety the outcome of the battle between Buccellati, Giorno, and The Cure. If necessary, to see better, Sogliola did not fail to lean out dangerously from the parapet.

He’s like a kid with a new toy that has just been bought thought Fugo.

The outcome of the fight seemed already decided. Buccellati, because of The Cure’s violent attack and the effect of Purple Haze’s virus, almost couldn't lift himself from the floor.

For his part, Giorno couldn’t even breathe due to the furious attacks of the berserk stand. The match might have been already concluded.

– Go! Go!

Completely rapt by the show, Sogliola violently clapped with both of his hands on the railing. He resembled a race fanatic spurring the horse on which he had bet on. Perhaps for him this was really nothing more than a game. This time, however, the stakes were human lives. Suddenly a small explosion of some type was heard.

Sogliola looked at his hands.

– Oh, no... a hole!

It really was a hole. A very tiny hole in that sturdy rubber getup, which risked becoming a huge problem for Sogliola. The suit was the only protection he had in that atmosphere saturated with a highly contagious virus.

In an attempt at plugging it, he started to stretch the rubber here and there. In distress, though, each time he stroked that spot, the hole ended getting a little bit bigger.

– Mister Sogliola, what happened?

Seeing him getting so agitated, Fugo struggled to hold back his laughter.

Sogliola didn’t even bother replying, but continued to fidget and squirm inside the coveralls. Maybe he was copiously sweating, since it started to be heard the slimy sound of wet rubber sliding over a body.

Having completely lost his cool, vexed and at the peak of despair, Sogliola threw away the protective mask from his face to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

– Mister Sogliola! Your mask!

Almost without realising it, he had thrown away the mask he had brought to protect himself from the virus by his own volition!

– Aaaah!

Sogliola was already panicking. Fugo, to calm him, placed a hand on his shoulder, but the old man continued to yell, and hastily threw away the boy's hand with his own.

– Hey, you! What was that for?!

Immediately, Fugo's voice sounded full of anger. Noticing the danger, Sogliola appeared to momentarily recover his composure. One should *never* let that boy get angry. At any cost.

– Ah... sorry... it's alright. By now the match is won... I don't have anything else to do, here. I'll leave you alone to finish the job. I... I'll go...

Fugo followed, with his eyes, Sogliola's figure that hastily left the observation post to flee through an emergency exit, then, after having tossed a look at the ongoing situation, he muttered:

– I really don't think it'll be that easy, on the contrary, mister Sogliola. Afterwards he disappeared again in the night's shadows.

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From the emergency exit, you'd pass through a suspended passageway that led to an antechamber. The cool wind that blew from the sea was really pleasant. It felt like being alive again, finally.

In the anteroom, his men were waiting for him with everything he needed to get changed. That unhappy rubber outfit gave him the sensation of it being stuck to his body as if it were made of jelly, and it reminded him about that horrid white monster that disgusted him.

At the thought of being able to change his clothes, Sogliola's steps got faster.

The antechamber wasn't just a simple empty room. It was designated to be used by other prelates, many of which were forced to have ties with the organisation, which obtained from them a series of advantages even higher than those derived from the management of gambling. The room was furnished with few pieces of furniture, a table and a bed with a rather sober look. Maybe it was a reflection of the Bishop's personality but there really was only the bare minimum.

He didn't find the men that should have been there waiting for him, but all Sogliola thought about it was: *Stupid pieces of shit! They never miss an opportunity to slack off!*

He just needed to have, right there and then, the necessary to change clothes. The rest came later. As soon as he entered, he undressed himself and threw away the rubber outfit. He made a cursory examination on his whole body and thought to not have been infected.

– Everything's good! – he exclaimed, relieved, patting himself here and there to be sure.

The city of Venezia was still enveloped in darkness, but it would be, by now, only for a few hours more. That whole story ended up dragging in a large number of citizens, but that didn't seem to matter much to Sogliola.

And like that, finally, goodbye to Venezia! he thought. Since he successfully carried out a direct order from the Boss, he was certain that a promotion in rank would have been expected.

He would have bid forever goodbye to this city in which he had nothing but unpleasant memories to leave behind, and he would have moved to someplace else in the peninsula. Surely a place with a much bigger business. Torino, maybe. Or Milano. He knew that for those of the organisation

there were excellent possibilities of doing business even in Trieste. Roma was rather unlikely, but if he could have moved into the capital... At that thought Sogliola felt himself wanting to burst out laughing from satisfaction.

A little boy was crying in a dirty alley.

He had probably been beaten. His face was full of bruises, and on his knee he had a cut from which blood copiously poured to the ground.

That little boy was Sogliola.

He thought again about the days of his childhood where the everyday routine had just been suffering a series of teasings and abuses. He never forgot what he had to endure.

One day I’ll show those bastards who I am! I’ll make them kneel at my feet!

At the thought of the neighbourhood’s bullies prostrated at his feet, he was able to endure anything.

Now I can only dream of it, but one day... Surely, one day I...

That had been the incentive that gave him the drive to reach the position in which he was now.

For that reason he had joined a gang. He had ousted the companions that didn’t suit him, and sometimes he got his hands dirty in order to reach a higher position. Always with that motive in his mind. Because of that he underwent the arrow’s trial of his own accord.

One day I’ll be the leader. Only then, when from the apex I see the whole world at my feet, I’ll feel rewarded for all of the suffering I had to endure.

He was completely sure of it.

Finally, the much longed for moment had come. Sogliola got shaken again by a fit of laughter.

Actually, he never reached the real summit, but he had managed to obtain power and money in vaster amounts than he had ever expected. He didn’t need to stay stuck in Venezia. He didn’t need to go around terrorising his brainless minions anymore. And then, before long, he could have retired from the scene, bought a villa facing the Mediterraneo and live the rest of his days in peace.

Tonight, at home, I’ll open a bottle of the good stuff to celebrate he thought, removing the tracksuit he had worn under the rubber coverall. He was about to grab the suit that had been prepared for him from the bed, when his hand suddenly stopped.

There was something black on the neatly folded suit.

It was a spider.

A black spider, roughly as big as a lighter.

It serenely strolled on the suit moving its eight hairy legs.

– Who let this gross thing inside?! It ruins my suit!

He turned his gaze around the room but didn’t see anyone. Damn them.

– Hey! How is it possible that there's no one here?! – he yelled at last, shooting hateful glares at the spider.

Two men finally appeared on the threshold.

– What's happening? – asked the younger of the two.

– What a bunch of good-for-nothings! Look at that, on my suit! Don't you see what kind of huge spider has placed itself on it?! Pieces of shit! I was in seventh heaven, and you let everything go to...

When he turned towards the two men and saw their faces, words died in his throat. It was Giorno and Buccellati.

He saw them both at the mercy of that monstrous rabbit just prior. So why were they here now?

– I don't think there's anything that surprising – said Buccellati, with a serious expression.

– Why?! My plan was perfect! How did you survive that virus?!

Giorno and Buccellati, at that question, exchanged a look and smiled.

– Perfection doesn't exist – replied Buccellati, getting a step closer to Sogliola.

– You thought about killing us with Purple Haze's virus, but things didn't exactly go as you planned. Well, up until the idea of amplifying the virus' power using that girl, the plan wasn't bad, but...

It was Giorno who continued.

– Fugo probably forgot to tell you an important thing.

– A thing...? *What* thing?!

– On me – continued Giorno, – Purple Haze's virus has no effect.

– What?!

Caught completely off guard, Sogliola couldn't manage to say anything else.

Giorno already had to deal with Purple Haze's virus near the ruins of Pompeii's city when he had gone there to retrieve the 'key' needed to access the Turtle. It had happened near a place called 'the house of the tragic poet'.

When Abbacchio, Fugo, and Giorno went there, they were attacked by Illuso, one of the organisation's traitors. Illuso's stand, Man in The Mirror, had successfully put them in serious trouble with its ability of freely traversing between the real world and the one reflected in mirrors. Inside that surreal space only objects or people 'authorized' by Illuso could get in. Fallen in his trap, the three companions ended up being separated from one another and, worse even, from their own stands, to be left at the mercy of Man in The Mirror.

It was then that Purple Haze went out of control. Away from the one who led it, it had started to spread the virus without making any discrimination between friends and enemies. To avoid the infection, Illuso had escaped inside the mirror.

Giorno had followed him after having willingly infected himself, that way Illuso had been forced to return again to the real world, where, however, Purple Haze was waiting for him.

How had Giorno managed to survive? When he infected himself with the virus, he had used the power of his stand Gold Experience to transform a brick into a snake. The snake, born in a place already plagued with the virus, was immune to it because already part of its metabolism. Using its blood to extract a serum capable of defeating the virus was all it took. Giorno was literally vaccinated against that lethal threat. Thanks to his calculated actions, Giorno had not only managed to save his own life, but also successfully accomplished the mission.

Obviously Sogliola could not know this. He had taken for granted the fact that Purple Haze had the reputation of being endowed with an invincible virus. He certainly couldn't imagine that someone able to defeat it existed.

– Purple Haze's virus can't do anything to me. I already have the antibodies. Fugo must have taken part in this plan with this in mind.

At Giorno's words, Sogliola almost seemed to forget to breathe.

Why? I'm smarter than all of these brats. I'm smarter than all of them put together! How's this possible?!

– In practice, Fugo remained in a position where, while it allowed him to not betray the organisation, it also permitted him to not betray us either.

Buccellati made a gesture with his head as if to say he agreed with Giorno, then he added:

– Apparently, you must have been rather unpleasant towards him. Fugo didn't betray us nor the organisation, but he betrayed *you*!

Buccellati's words hit Sogliola like a blow to the head.

He betrayed me? Me, really? That brat? he asked himself, looking at his hands.

Everything seemed to be going so smoothly... everything...

It was then that Sogliola lifted his gaze towards them, exclaiming with rage:

– Don't think you've won the match!

He had placed his left hand on his own chest and the right had lightly brushed the bed. An instant later he had vanished, while the bed had taken his place, erected in a vertical position.

Giorno and Buccellati threw themselves to the sides to dodge the bed that was falling over them.

– What...?!

The bed loudly fell to the ground revealing beyond it Sogliola, crouched to the floor with a haughty smile. It appeared that all the surprise of earlier had disappeared to give place to an apparent confidence.

– I admit that my plan has been a failure – he hissed with a sneer, the face filled with wrinkles even more menacing, – but I won't be stupid enough to let myself get killed by a pair of little assholes such as you!

The instant in which he finished that sentence, Sogliola had vanished again.

– What the hell is happening? – shouted Buccellati, looking around. Giorno had rushed to the exact spot in which Sogliola had been just before, and was carefully examining the ground.

– He's underneath! He must be already underneath, Buccellati! – he exclaimed. Before he could even finish the sentence, Buccellati had already hurried out the door. Giorno quickly followed him.

– The bastard's able to swap the position of objects! – yelled Giorno towards Buccellati who was running ahead of him.

– In the canal he switched the polystyrene with the mines! It must be that! – agreed Buccellati without slowing down.

– This means that, attempting to catch him while he sees us, the chances that he'll manage to escape are many – and saying this, he stopped.

– Ugly sons of bitches! Damn them!

Throwing a long list of insults, Sogliola hurried towards the exit on the back of the basilica.

Using on himself the power of his stand, Joy Division, which allowed him to swap the positions of what he touched, he had been able to remove himself from a critical situation. He had changed his position with that of the ground and had escaped from the floor below.

It was a system he had often used when he was still a little street lout. He never thought he'd still need it in this kind of situation.

Shit! I've failed in the most pitiful of ways! But I have no intention of dying right here at the hands of them! The most important thing now is to flee somewhere safe!

While he got past the various cloisters and ventured towards the back of the church, Sogliola's features were beaded with sweat.

I'm too old for running long distances! he thought, and finally interrupted the long sprint, breathing a sigh of relief.

Not much further, by now. At the end of this corridor is the exit!

He still couldn't consider himself safe, but the distance he had put between him and the enemy should have been enough. Thinking so, he raised his face.

At the end of the corridor, in front of the wide open exit door, there was someone.

Maybe it was one of his men. No. It wasn't one of them.

The one waiting for him at the exit was Mista, one of Buccellati's companions.

He really had the threatening appearance he had seen in his card file. Rather, worse.

Between the devil and the deep blue sea... he thought.

The following instant he heard the whistle of a bullet flying near his left ear.

– W-what...?!

As a reflex he placed his hand on it and felt it throbbing.

– First of all, introductions! – exclaimed Mista, pointing the gun again at him. A second shot, then a third. One after the other the bullets flew hissing dangerously near Sogliola.

Come and get me! Said Sogliola to himself, throwing himself against a wall and preparing to use his Joy Division again.

– Now, Buccellati!

– What?!

Taken by surprise, Sogliola hesitated. And it was then that it happened.

– Sticky Fingers!

At that call, a weird breach opened under his feet. It was Buccellati that, hidden underground, had used Sticky Fingers's ability to create a hole in the floor.

Sogliola lost his balance and was about to fall into the hole, when he noticed some sort of rope that was dangling right above his head.

If I hold on to that...

He gathered all of his strength to jump towards that rope. While he did, he had the clear impression that the rope had stretched out in his hand's direction.

No. It hadn't been a trick of the eye. What he had thought to be a rope, had actually been the green branch of a climbing plant. One that had been given life by the power of Giorno's Gold Experience.

While Sogliola extended his hand, in no time the plant had stretched out until it reached the height of his arm and, moving as a tentacle, had started to wrap around him. After which it had started to squeeze him with force. Sogliola looked under his feet. The hole opened by Sticky Fingers was waiting for him like a huge gaping mouth.

I'm trapped!

Like this, hanging in mid-air, he certainly couldn't exchange that vine with something else using Joy Division.

While he was bitterly regretting having been so reckless, the creeper continued to grow along his back, then around his neck, until it gradually covered his face.

Not only that. The green buds that sprouted along the stem had started to swell, opening in an explosion of little flowers that in a second were already withered. And then again other buds...

That vine moved and grew at an incredible speed, as in one of those documentaries where it's possible to see plants grow at high speed thanks to a special type of shooting. Eventually, an unpleasant sound of broken bones could be heard coming from his arm.

– I don't like your system of dragging innocent people. I don't like it one bit. I'd be really curious to know how you planned to pay your debts, but... – said Buccellati, who had appeared out of nowhere, getting closer. Alongside him were Giorno and Mista as well.

Sogliola would have liked to ask for mercy, but the plant that covered his throat was squeezing too tight and impeded him from speaking, and his supplications transformed into grotesque gurgling.

He watched Buccellati's right hand pointing right towards him. At the sight of the figure that stood behind that, he suddenly turned pale.

In that moment he fervently wished he had never been a stand user.

In the exact moment in which he had seen Sticky Fingers, he understood what destiny awaited him. What was prepared for him was nothing short of death.

He felt an indescribable dread raising up his throat.

If only I had never been a stand user... If only I had never *been one in my life...* it was all he could think about, and he repeated it to himself indefinitely at this point.

Until, by constantly doing it, something in him started to burn like a flame without light, that sent sparks in every direction.

No! It's exactly because I'm a stand user that maybe I can survive!

– Joy Division!

With a surprising strength for a man his age, Sogliola evoked his stand. It was the frightening force that only a man in the face of death is able to bring out.

Sogliola's hands, released from the plant that had coiled tightly around him, extended towards Buccellati.

– If I can exchange my position with him... If only I could change... Nnghrlllh...

In the instant in which Joy Division's hand was about to brush against Buccellati, the sound of something that cut through the air echoed all around.

It had been a matter of a split-second. Sticky Fingers's fist had been so quick that not even Sogliola had seen it, despite being a stand user as well.

The first punch was flung at his right eye.

A second, then a third, a fourth... A series of punches so fast as to be invisible to the naked eye started to pour down in rapid succession on Sogliola's face. Everything happened so quickly that the man didn't even have the perception of how his face was being reduced to a mere pulp of flesh and blood.

– Arrivederci – said Buccellati, and then, with a yell:

– ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARIII!!

Sticky Fingers continued to hail down its flurry of punches.

Sogliola, unable to put to use his Joy Division, remained there suffering like a boxer's wretched punchbag.

– ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARI ARIRIRII!!

The piercing wail of Sogliola, that originated from behind the Basilica di San Marco, didn't go on for long.

***

In that same exact moment, a gondola left the Riva degli Schiavoni aiming towards the open sea. On board there was a boy with blond hair.

From the tip of the boat hung a small lamp which illuminated the sea, still black in the night.

From one of the cathedral’s balconies, Giorno and Buccellati were following it with their gazes.

Going away towards the open sea that little light appeared tragically lonely.

– Addio, Pannacotta Fugo – muttered Giorno. And already the little light began to lose itself in the distance and blend with the darkness.

INTERLUDIO

The sea birds had started to fly.

While he let himself be carried on that gondola, dawn was already around the corner. By now the sun was about to peek out on the horizon, beyond that smooth, dead calm sea. The scent of dried salt pleasantly tantalised him.

Fugo was far from the coast at this point. He spat the mint leaf he was chewing into the water and filled his lungs with the fresh morning air.

It had been that old and close to the ground man who had planned everything. It had been him, too, who chose that girl who had the power to absorb the pain and suffering of others, to make her the key element of the entire cruel project.

Sogliola, over the years, had compiled a list of all the stand users that were in Venezia and had chosen the girl's name picking it among those in a thick card index.

He even foresaw that her stand would absorb and strengthen Purple Haze's virus, then, inevitably, would spread it all over Venezia. It would even drag in tourists and common citizens that didn't have anything to do with the organisation.

When he had been informed about that plan, Fugo had been deeply repulsed by it.

Obviously, from the moment he had left Buccellati and his companions to return to working for the organisation, he very well knew that he had to obey to the capi's orders.

The organisation punished those who didn't respect the rules with death.

Eliminating the comrades with whom he had fought together until that day with his own hands. He imagined the condition would have been *that* . They would have never welcomed back, without some proof of loyalty, 'the lost sheep' that shortly before had defected alongside a group of traitors. The organisation had strict rules.

But there was one thing he really couldn't stomach.

He did not approve that to reach his goal, in this case to kill traitors, any means could be justifiable. That one could, ultimately, take the liberty of dragging in even people who had nothing to do with this.

In front of Sogliola who merrily explained the plan, Fugo had become aware of some important factors.

First of all Purple Haze's virus was in no way invincible. Moreover, the stand power of the girl called Coniglio had not yet fully matured.

He had put together the various elements that would come to be part of that plan and had done a very rapid evaluation. Then he added the fact that Giorno had already been vaccinated against Purple Haze's virus. Thanks to him, it could have worked out.

As a final result, his behaviour could have appeared as a betrayal towards the organisation. Yet he really hadn't been able to forgive that old man who cheerfully planned a mass extermination.

He had to come up with a system to stop that plan. A system that could have even represented some sort of parting gift for his friends of before.

He closed his eyes before the dazzling reflections of the rays of the sun which had slowly shown itself on the horizon. Behind his lids played, as if on a movie screen, the events of the past hours, then they vanished bit by bit.

He asked himself if that girl would have been able to overcome the awful experience. And he asked himself if Buccellati and the others would ever be able to reach the Boss, somehow.

– Yes, they surely will! – he exclaimed out loud.

Especially because with them was Giorno, with his presence of mind. With someone like him, capable of uniting together the individual elements of Buccellati’s group, always on the verge of coming apart at the seams, it wouldn’t have been impossible.

He was sure of it by now.

He didn’t regret having left Buccellati’s group. Fugo had made the choice which in that moment he believed to be more right. He was sure that even his ex-companions would have been able to understand, and wouldn’t have blamed him.

Decisions can be made and changed at any given moment. At first the ways to reach a goal can be different but, sooner or later, the right opportunity surely comes.

Fugo, vehemently dragged back and forth between a bestial nature and a superior intellect, noticed for the first time something that went beyond his condition.

Something that went beyond the rationality and the violence, and indicated the goal to follow. It was about the courage of choosing only one answer at a time in the midst of the infinite number of those that fate offers daily to each living being who treads the ground of this world.

CAPITOLO OTTO

Some time after the unfolding of these events, a new urban legend was born.

La chiesa in mezzo alla steppa[8] was a tale that had a decent success among ethnology students. The story was approximately the following.

It took place in a sort of steppe. A young guy, returning from a friend's house, ended up getting lost in that desolate barren land. The boy wandered between rocks and scrub without even finding a place to rest. He roamed and roamed restlessly until, having even exhausted all his tears, at the limit of fatigue, he collapsed exhausted.

It was then that suddenly a maiden appeared. It was a young and beautiful girl, who woke up the boy and lead him to a nearby shack.

At first sight it really resembled a hovel, but on the roof there was a little bell and around the house even a little garden. In the garden hopped a little rabbit as white as snow.

'Il Piccolo Paradiso[9]' many called it so.

In the shack the boy had been given a soup of water and salt[10], in addition to stale bread, and had been encouraged to rest.

After that the girl had called the rabbit that was in the garden, had made it curl up in her lap, and had asked the boy if he was wounded.

As soon as the boy had pointed the aching spot, the girl had delicately massaged it, and the pain began to decrease until it disappeared as if by magic. Then the girl had asked if he didn't have anything that troubled him. He had started to talk about it and, while he spoke, he had noticed that maybe it wasn't really such a serious thing.

Before long the boy felt incredibly well and had laid down in that shack's bed to fall asleep. When he had reopened his eyes, however, he had found himself on a bench near his home and had started to think it had all been a dream.

According to the many versions, the story could be set in a desert, or on an isolated island in the middle of the sea, or variations of the same kind. In the same way even the age and profession of the protagonist changed. Despite being rare, it could happen that in place of the male protagonist there was a *female* protagonist, but the basic structure remained unaltered in every version: there always was someone that got lost and got his wounds and troubles healed inside the house of a girl who brought with her a white rabbit, and that then this someone mysteriously found themselves home after a night's sleep.

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[8] T.N.: literally "the church in the middle of the steppe".
[9] T.N.: literally "the small paradise".
[10] T.N.: a salt soup coupled with stale bread might be a reference to panzanella or maybe just the worst food ever.

It was said that that legend had been born from the innate wish to be comforted, that it was a metaphor portraying the desire of returning to nature, and many silly explanations circulated about the origin of this tale. The only certain thing is that for a certain period of time it was liked and was 'trendy', but after some years it stopped being told even in cultural institutes, until it was forgotten.

Actually, it was neither a fictional tale nor an urban legend. It was Coniglio's story after that awful adventure.

***

When Coniglio had reopened her eyes in the Basilica di San Marco, and the boy in front of her had been grasped by that huge white monster which slammed him around, she hadn't been able to believe the scene before her eyes. She had shaken her head as if to wake up. Then, suddenly, behind the boy's back had appeared the figure of a man shining with a golden light.

It wasn't correct to define that being a 'man'. Of a man it had the appearance, yes, but its movements were much more agile. As soon as it appeared, it had attacked the huge white monster with a staggering speed.

It was in that moment that Coniglio had become aware of it. The white and huge creature, that monster so big it seemed to reach the cathedral's ceiling, was none other than The Cure, the tiny rabbit that had been with her since she was a child, grown excessively.

The golden man had hit it hard plenty of times, but The Cure's huge body didn't seem to suffer any effect. It was the same as when you poke with a finger a balloon full of water.

In fact, The Cure absorbed in its body even the damage that was directly inflicted to it, and so continued to grow. The more it got attacked, indeed, the more its body became larger by the minute.

It had happened right at the instant she became aware of the situation. The boy that The Cure squeezed, suddenly, had given a yell.

– Buccellati! The girl is in danger! Try to protect her!

Coniglio had turned towards the direction in which the boy had seemed to make his plea, and had seen another young guy. He had his hair cut into a straight bob, styled in a weird way, and dressed in a white suit decorated with flashy zippers. His suit was shredded at this point. Furthermore, he displayed those familiar 'symptoms'.

The right arm was swollen and livid, between blue and black. The virus must have already been in his bloodstream, and continued to multiply with devastating effects. Yet the boy didn't back down. With incredible endurance, he had moved towards Coniglio.

– Are you okay? You aren't wounded? – he had asked with kindness, even if, actually, he appeared about to fall apart at any moment.

Coniglio had felt herself gripped by doubt.

Do you want this story to repeat itself once more? Here too?

Suddenly, she recalled a voice from the depths of her mind.

You must save them. You have the power to save them.

It was the voice of that boy. In the dark she had recalled those eyes, in some way veiled with sadness.

Yes, it's true. I can help them!

– The Cure!

The girl's voice had loudly echoed in the whole cathedral. Suddenly, The Cure had stopped attacking Giorno. It had tilted its head to the side as if trying to better hear the sound of the dear voice that had last called out for it quite some time ago.

– The Cure! I need your help! I beg you, return to what you used to be!

As soon as Coniglio had finished shouting those words, from The Cure's body had begun to blow a very strong wind that brought with itself a rain of soft fur that reached up to the height of the cathedral's arches. For a second its fur appeared to shine hair by hair, then its brilliance faded.

Giorno, who had held onto a column as to not let himself be blown away by that wind, had heaved a huge sigh of relief. He looked in the midst of that mountain of fur, fluffily falling towards the ground as if it were snow, searching with his eyes the spot in which, until shortly before, was The Cure. Yet, here there wasn't any monster. In its place, on the lap of the girl hunkered on the floor, was curled up a tiny white creature with huge ears, which seemed completely at ease, as if that had always been the only place where it wanted to be.

The light blue precious stones it had on the tip of its ears twinkled like stars in the night.

In that moment, Buccellati was watching the rain of white fur that was falling from above. The arm that just before was horribly swollen and deformed because of the virus' effect had returned back to normal as if nothing had ever happened.

***

Already two months have passed since I came to this place. It's almost time for me to think about the next destination.

She was in the USA, in Illinois. In a small village, so small that it wasn't even marked on maps. It was a place a bit far from the highway, in an area still rich with greenery.

All around there were only fields, stretching to the horizon. Heaving a deep sigh, her lungs filled with the pleasant smell of sun-dried grass. From somewhere could be heard the engine of a distant tractor.

There's no place more wonderful than this, out of all those I've lived in until today was thinking Coniglio, from the depths of her heart.

After the events of Venezia, first of all she left for the USA. Saying that she wasn't worried at all about her mother who she had left behind in Roma would have been a lie, but at the moment she was completely preoccupied by the horrible things that had happened. She wanted to *atone* . It was the only thing that for her, now, had absolute precedence.

The day after newspapers had reported the case in block letters, questioning if it had been a "new indiscriminate terrorist attack", after that they had published the list of the over one hundred victims that had gotten involved. They were the people she had tried to save, but whose life had slipped away anyway. Her friend and colleague Winona, the little child that lost her young life at the hospital, and all the people she saw on the ground that night in the city.

She could have helped them and hadn't been able to. No form of repentance would have never been enough.

What had happened had taught her an important lesson.

If I can do something, I must do it in the best way possible. I have the gift of healing people from 'injury' and 'suffering'. And now I've decided to start using it seriously.

Of course her power wasn't limitless. For this reason she hadn't been able to fully prevent the tragedy in Venezia, since she didn't know enough about her powers and had never done anything to know them.

She had to pay for the mistake she had made, and would have used her whole life to settle that bill.

To atone for this she immediately left for a foreign country.

I'll use my power on people that don't know anything about me. I don't know what will happen. Maybe it'll be a failure, or maybe everything will go well. Either way, it will be okay like this. I've decided to stop living in fear of discovering myself.

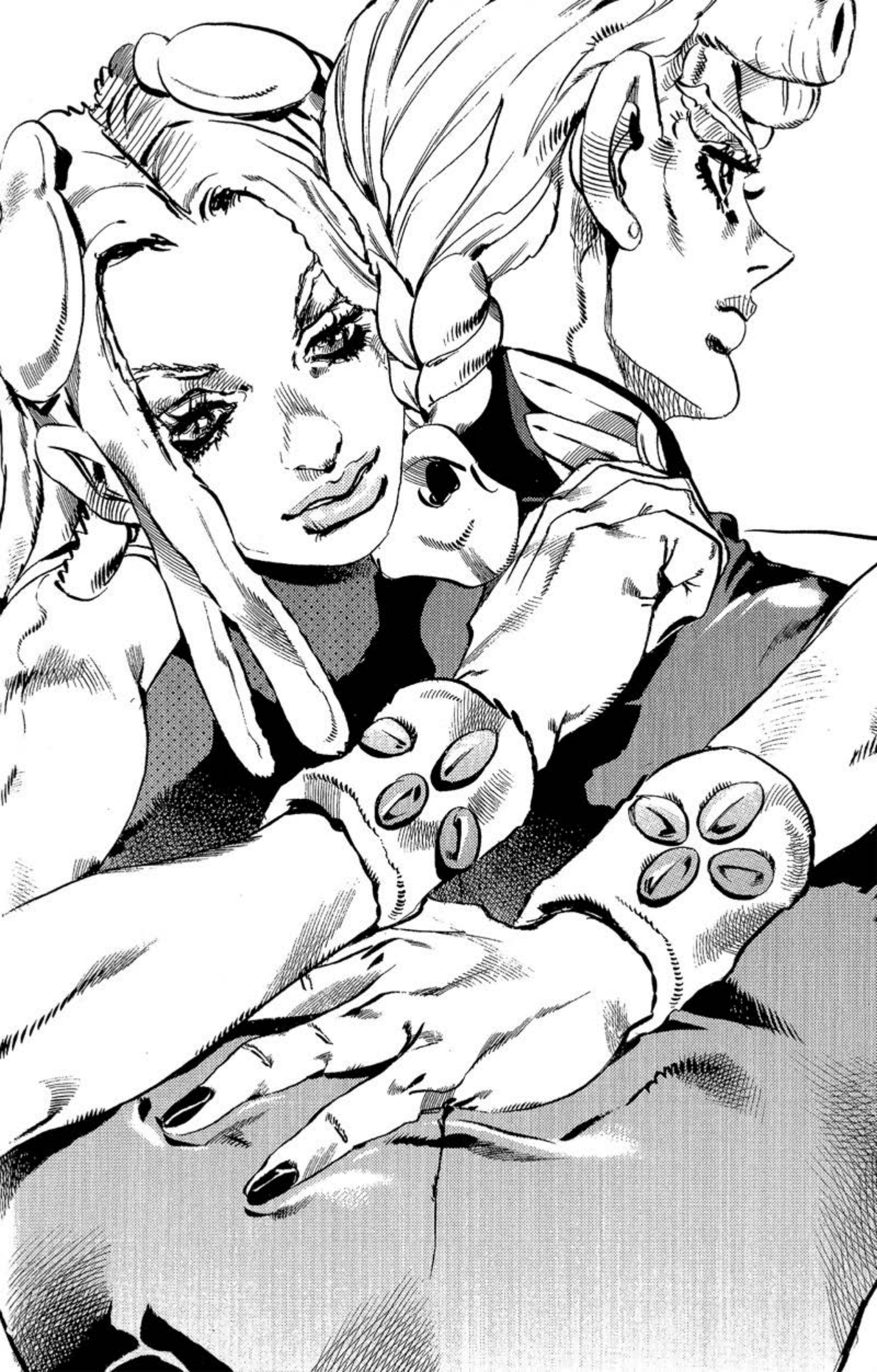
When, during her journey, unpleasant experiences happened to her, there were always some words that came back to her.

– I know you've suffered a lot for the things that happened, but even if everything was caused by one of our companions, listen to my words, please. It's not possible to save everyone. The choices you can make are infinite, and the world is too complex. Neither you nor I can know which choice is right and which is wrong – had said the boy inside San Marco's cathedral, all in a single breath. Then he had looked her right in the eye, as if to say "you understand, right?" and had added:

– Whatever might be the terrible consequence that you face, the fact of choosing something and accepting its consequences is the most important thing. Maybe I'm the one being mistaken, but...

He was a strange boy, and on his clothes he had pinned big brooches in the shape of ladybugs.

His gaze was clear, and that meant he was speaking from the heart.



It was as if he emanated some sort of golden light.

A clear ray of golden light able to reach even the deepest part of her soul.

The proud blood that flowed for generations in the veins of the Joestar family’s members, from which that boy descended through unexpected ramifications lost to time, flowed without a doubt in his as well, and that beautiful light had left a mark on Coniglio’s heart.

The girl would have never noticed, had she never met him. In her veins, too, began to pulse some of that golden light. And from that moment on it would do so forever.

The blood could be shared, and could give life to a new light.

– We did choose the path of fight, and I’m not ashamed of it. I hope it’s the same for you. I truly hope so.

With those words the boy left the church behind together with his companion, and began to walk towards the final battle.

The girl, looking at their retreating figures, had perceived the heroic strength of their resolve, and was filled with more respect for them than she’d ever felt for anyone before.

The path of their struggle, perhaps, was lit by that golden light.

A last thought crossed her mind.

As they are going to fight their battle... then I... then I too... I too have decided to fight mine!

TRANSLATORS' COMMENTS

◇ AzoreanEve: Don't lose your faith in this translation for what I'm about to say but I didn't know any Italian when I started this. It was great fun learning it (and gaining more insight on Japanese as well). Lesbicattiva eased me a questa bella lingua by translating the first pages before we decided I'd take the first half of the book, and she the other. She helped a lot with idioms and expressions, but most importantly, she is a very kind, very fun person and made this whole project much more enjoyable than I expected it to be.

I've never done something like this before, I don't even translate things from Portuguese, much less Italian, but I wish this book to be a kind of 'payback' for the JJBA community. I usually prefer fan translations to the official ones when it comes to this series and I suppose this was my time to step up and also contribute. Hopefully we'll get to see some well-deserved attention being given to GHGR since it's got some pretty cool characters and fights in it. Espero que gostem do livro! Xau~

◇ Lesbicattiva: We've finished!! I still can't believe we've managed to translate through the heaps of horny and weird text this book had to offer!

As written above doing this little project really has been unimaginably nice, and I didn't even realize we had everything ready in just five or six months! Time flies when you're having fun (and when you're still on google docs at 3AM)!

Also, don't be fooled by AzoreanEve words, if it wasn't for her excellent English I'd still be thinking she's actually living in some nearby Italian region pretending to be Portuguese! On a serious note, though, I'm deeply thankful to her for all of these compliments, asking if someone had the Italian copy of the novel on a night I had nothing better to do than to scroll tumblr's dash, putting up with my mistakes, the many random comments I left in the notes about Rigatoni and formatting the pdf part, but, more importantly, for being herself.

It might sound silly but reading JOJO somehow comforted me when I was going through a bad spot and I, too, think this is just a 'way of giving back'. Spero che questa storia vi piaccia! Ciao!!

Ps. 'It takes place in Italy so use the Italian word, that shit pisses me off.'

Maybe you'll see us again in a translation of JJBA: Genesis of Universe…

HIROHIKO ARAKI was born in 1960 in Sendai, in the Miyagi Prefecture. He made his debut on "Shonen Jump" magazine in 1980 with his western manga Poker Under Arms. After a handful of short stories and the mini-series Cool Shock B.T. and Gorgeous Irene, he published Baoh with which he won over the audiences. His great success would only arrive in 1987 with JoJo's Bizarre Adventures, a long saga spanning from 1800 to 2011, divided into six very different parts, through the Joestar Family descendants. Among his prestigious volumes, the 'strange stories' of Under Execution Under Jailbreak and The Lives of Eccentrics, a collection of bizarre biographies of bizarre characters that were actually real. He's currently working on a new western series titled Steel Ball Run, partially tied to the JoJo saga.

SHOTARO MIYA was born in 1972 in Ishikawa Prefecture. Alongside his university studies he started collaborating with video game magazines and writing. Lately he was the editor for "Game Maestro 4".

GICHI OTSUKA was born in 1974, in Hokkaido. His scope of action spans from video games to animation, up to more unusual forms of culture. Writer and editor, among his most important works, Tokyo Head stands out.

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The neighbourhood bullies called her Coni l'immortale because, no matter how much they mistreated her, she would always stand up again, and completely unscathed.
That was because Coni had a secret.
A secret she should have never revealed to anyone, and that cost her years of marginalisation and solitude.
Now that little girl is a young woman who spends the days asking herself why her life goes passively on, while busying over the daily work at a hotel.
But her life is about to radically change, because the hitmen of the mafia organisation called Passione have discovered what she can do, and, unbeknownst to her, have decided to use that power to eliminate a group of young defectors on the run.
A vile and inhuman plan, whose actualization is about to catch the entire city of Venezia in a grip of black dread.

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